

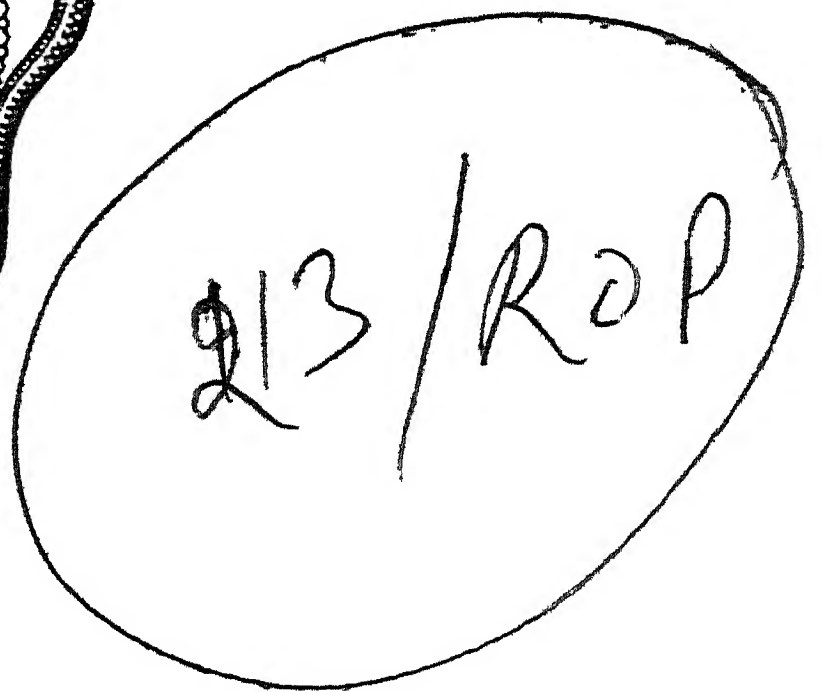
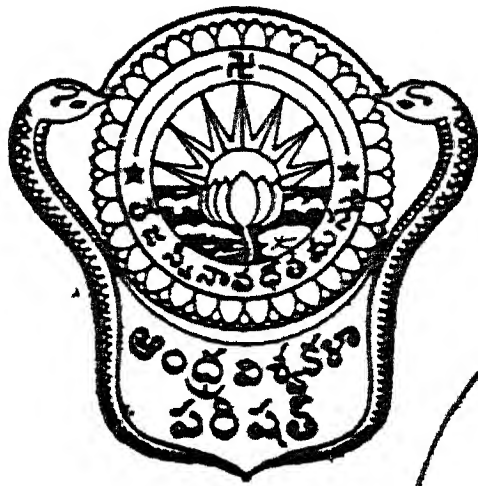
Abercrombie's Poems

(A Critical Study)

(Thesis accepted for the award of Ph.D. Degree
by the Karnatak University)

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To

My Parents

Contents

	Page
Preface	vii
I. Introduction	1
II. Life and Work	7
III. Shorter Poems	17
IV. Interludes and The Sale of Saint Thomas*	32
V. Emblems of Love	67
VI. Idyls	84
VII. Plays	106
VIII. The Man Behind The Poet	135
IX. Conclusion	142
Bibliography	175
Appendix	177

Preface

This book offers a critical study of chiefly “The Poems of Lascelles Abercrombie”, published by the Oxford University Press, London, in 1930, hereafter referred to simply as “Poems” in the foot-notes. My attempt has been to survey them and interpret their meaning and message, after an *Introduction* and sketch of the poet’s *Life and work*. After a detailed and critical study of his individual poems and plays, an attempt to show the man behind the poet, is made. The concluding chapter gives a full estimate of Abercrombie, as a Poet, Playwright and Philosopher, piecing together the available criticism and throwing new light thereon.

I retained Abercrombie’s spelling of certain words like *Idyls* and followed the order of publication of his works in the collected poems. I added the chronological list of his works made by Prof. Elton with the help of Ralph Abercrombie and Dr. Percy Withers, as an appendix to my book.

I hope that this book will, in its own way, help the study of ‘a major poet’, as Alice Meynell would call him. Further, Abercrombie’s sources which Prof. Oliver Elton believes to be a fit study for “an aspirant of a doctor’s cap” are fully discussed in their proper places.

I am grateful to *Padmasri* Prof. V. K. Gokak for his valuable guidance in the preparation of this work.

C. L. S.

Introduction

Great was your wisdom in all kinds of learning,
As though you could have lectured to Longinus.

—*Edmund Blunden*

Lascelles Abercrombie is one of the most outstanding men of letters of the twentieth-century England. At once a great critic and major poet of his time, he is often called the *Georgian Laureate*. Strictly speaking, this appellation is not worth noticing. The term 'Georgian' is used in two senses in the criticism of this period. First, it refers to poets flourishing in the reign of George V or to contributors to the famous series of Georgian anthologies. Thus it refers to time. Secondly, as *GEORGIAN POETRY* is also the title given to a series of anthologies, dated respectively 1911-12, 1913-15, 1916-17, 1918-19, and 1920-22, edited by Edward Marsh, it refers to poets who wrote in a certain manner associated with the general trend of contributors to those anthologies. Abercrombie is a Georgian Laureate in the first sense and not in the second.

The poets whose work is represented in these anthologies are Lascelles Abercrombie, Gordon Bottomley, Rupert Brooke, G. K. Chesterton, W. H. Davies, Walter de la Mare, John Drinkwater, James Elroy Flecker, Wilfrid Wilson Gibson, D. H. Lawrence, John Masefield, Harold Monro, T. Sturge Moore, Ronald Ross, E. B. Sargant, James Stephens, R. C. Trevelyan, Ralph Hodgson, Francis Ledwidge, W. J. Turner, J. C. Squire, Siegfried Sassoon, J. Rosenberg, Robert Nichols, Robert Graves, John Freeman, Mawrice Baring, Herbert Asquith, F. B. Young, Thomas Moulton, Edward Shanks, Martin Armstrong, Edmund Blunden, Peter Quinnell, V. Sackville-West, Richard Hughes and William Kerr. The Editor, Edward

Marsh. states in the last volume of the series, that he had tried to choose no verse but such as, in Wordsworth's phrase :

The high and tender Muses shall accept

With gracious smile, deliberately pleased.

But the Georgian group, says Alan Pryce-Jones, "was formed by a process of poetic silage", and "it came into existence only gradually and burst surprisingly into flame under the burning glass of a world at war" and that "out of the five volumes of poetry which appear to be anonymous strips of matter cut from a central block, it is the angry poets (Graves, Sassoon and Lawrence), who first clamoured for personal attention".¹

Miss Babette Deutsch observes, "actually the term *Georgian* has come to connote the work of some forty poets—work which, where it does not offer retreat into a dream-world, is apt to be characterised by a tender-minded quietism, and which generally exhibits a reluctance to abandon traditional forms and traditional matter. If it eschews the schemes upon which the Victorians anxiously meditated and those with which the men of the nineties sought to 'épater le bourgeois', and if its diction has the charm of simplicity, for the most part, it ignores the major features of our industrial and urban age: the factory, the city and the slum, as it ignores the less obvious problems which confront the contemporary mind."²

The significant tendencies of Georgian Poetry to which, it is said, Abercrombie has made a rich contribution are a 'scholarly tradition', a 'catholic' movement, an 'aesthetic' tendency, a tendency to 'realistic' impressionism, and a 'naturalistic' reversion to the simple life of the countryside, sea and open road.³

Abercrombie's poetry shows its leanings towards this school in a way as some of the above characteristics are found in it. But, the underlying keynote of his poetry is a stern and unbending realism. Medieval romantic themes of knights and fair ladies as also a conventional treatment of nature are a taboo in his poetry. Stonecutters, carpenters and others gave impulsion to his poetic utterance. With his minute particularity

¹ Alan Pryce-Jones, *The Georgian Poets*, p. 92.

² Babette Deutsch, *This Modern Poetry*, pp. 89-90.

³ Geoffrey Bullough, *The Trend of Modern Poetry*, p. 44.

in description, a fearless democratisation in theme and diction, emphasis even on the ugly and indecorous aspects of life and nature, and his probings into the mystical whirlpool of the unknown and the unknowable, he proclaims his revolt against the lifeless conventionalism of Tennyson. Nonetheless, his poetry reveals originality and individuality. We are rather tempted to agree with Mr. Llewellyn Jones when he says, "Mr. Abercrombie is not a Georgian poet in the 'school' sense of the term. From his thought to his language and rhythm he is strikingly individual".¹ We shall, therefore, instead of labelling him a Georgian, try to fit him into a coterie of poets (Bridges, Sturge Moore, Bottomley, Binyon and R.C. Trevelyan) "whose work, in general and particularly in the mythological category has more or less family resemblance, and is commonly classified, with favourable or unfavourable intent, as traditional, literary and academic".²

Prof. V. de S. Pinto says: "The best work of the typical Georgians such as J. C. Squire, John Freeman, Edward Shanks and F. B. Young, is an unambitious, limited pictorial sort of poetry comparable with that of some of Johnson's minor eighteenth-century poets like Pomfret, though it lacks the sense of contact with a living social background which is the strength of even the minor Augustans".³

Mr. R. A. Scott-James says, referring to Georgianism and to the poets included in these volumes: "So little do they essentially belong to it. What on earth, we may well ask, is G. K. Chesterton doing here? His rollicking, cheerful, contemporaneous verse, so spirited, so unliterary, has nothing whatever to do with the *Georgian* spirit. And D. H. Lawrence so impassioned, so lawless, so assertive—what has he to do with these rarified ones, these poetry-minded re-incarnations of the poets? And Robert Graves, again, with his restless idiosyncratic mind—can he be placed among all these writers of such estimable verse? And James Stephens, does he not belong more properly to the world of Irish romanticism?"⁴

¹ Llewellyn Jones, *First Impressions*, p. 151.

² Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry*, p. 429.

³ V. de S. Pinto, *Crisis in English Poetry*, p. 134.

⁴ R. A. Scott-James, *Fifty Years of English Literature*, p. 117.

Mr. Scott-James also shows how W. H. Davies, Lawrence Binyon, Thomas Sturge Moore, Lascelles Abercrombie, John Masefield, John Freeman and Edward Thomas defy the Georgian classification and pass on into a world of a very different complexion.¹ We can therefore say that Abercrombie is not a *Georgian* poet in the *school* sense of the term. In his thought² language and rhythm, he is strikingly individual. He himself says that he is less interested in the doctrines and tendencies of poetry than in poetry itself and is therefore "ready to allow any practical creed whatever, so long as it produces poetry.", To respect the noble sentiment of the poet, we will do well to assess his poetry without associating him with any particular school of thought.

Abercrombie's works belong to the last of Bacon's three categories of books. They are to be read wholly and with diligence; for, Abercrombie is a poet for the few and he is a great intellectual. Considerable interest in metaphysical argumentation and aptitude for intellectual exercise are the pre-requisites for a successful study and appreciation of his poetry. That is why, of all the modern English poets, he seems to be the one who is the least read and the least popular with the reading public. But the few that read him, do really enjoy and appreciate him for the mastery of his medium and for the intellectual heights to which he takes them unawares. Among his ardent admirers have been scholars and poets like Dr. Percy Withers, Prof. Oliver Elton, Charles Williams, Wilfrid Gibson and John Drinkwater.

Abercrombie is now more widely known as a critic than as a poet. As the aim of this thesis is to offer an interpretation of his poetry alone, an explanation may be offered regarding this limitation of its scope. In an article which appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*,³ it was pointed out that the question how far circumstances discouraged the poet and fostered the critic, is an unprofitable subject for speculation. This is no doubt true. But the conclusion was based upon an astounding proposition, laid down in all seriousness and with

¹ Ibid p. 123.

² *Preface to New English Poems*, 1931.

³ 5 November 1938, p. 712.

an air of finality. "The two were one; they said the same things; the only difference lay in the manner of saying them." This is a debatable statement.

It should be noted that all his critical works excepting his "Thomas Hardy", belong to one distinct branch of literary criticism. In all of them, he endeavours to give a lucid and convincing exposition of his theory of art. In other words, he seeks to explain therein the processes of poetic creation and poetic appreciation, from the aesthetic point of view, while Mr. I. A. Richards attempts the same from the psychological point of view. Even his "Principles of Literary Criticism" is only a commentary on Aristotle's Poetics. It may be possible for us to study his poetry, and with profit, in the light of his theories. It may even be conceded that the same outlook is, present in both and that both bear the stamp of the same intellect and personality. This is inevitable. But, clearly, he has not said the same things in both. They differ radically in content, aim and manner. Further, as a review points out, "much of his critical writing is, as the bibliography appended to the memoir shows, scattered in short volumes or periodicals, and it is impossible to read Dr. Elton's brilliant and sympathetic analysis of Abercrombie's work without feeling that something of greater value will be lost if these are not assembled and made available to all students of literature."¹ Therefore, there is nothing wrong in separating Abercrombie, the poet from Abercrombie, the critic.

Another disputable opinion, that Abercrombie is a better critic than poet, is also expressed in the same paper.² But his poetry is indeed as great as his criticism, if not greater. In this connection, it is interesting to know the author's own feelings in the matter. In a personal note sent to John Gawsworth, Abercrombie says in a self-complacent mood: "I have lived in a cottage in a daffodil country, and have, for a time, done what I wanted to do".³ This naturally sets us thinking. It should be possible to ascertain what it is he had done. From the little information we have of his life, we know that during his

¹ The Oxford Magazine, 16 November 1939.

² Times Literary Supplement, 5 November 1938.

³ John Gawsworth, *Ten Contemporaries*, p. 19.

stay in the country he wrote poetry, and he himself tells us later in the same note : "Mine was an ambition that would have harmed no one ; it was to live in the country and write poetry". If Abercrombie took to criticism, it was in an accidental way. His main interest was avowedly in poetry.

In any case, there is great need for a comprehensive estimate of Abercrombie's poetry. Barring a few general dissertations, practically no systematic and exhaustive treatise has come out either on Abercrombie's poetry or on his criticism, or on the two together. Mr. Charles Williams, who has himself given us a brief but valuable essay on Abercrombie, made an interesting remark in one of his letters to me : "It is a little curious, considering how much has been written about others, that he should be neglected".¹ This neglect might be one reason for his not being popular. Or it may be that "it is only the superficially dense style which keeps Abercrombie unpopular, almost an unread poet".² Abercrombie is most concerned with what he has to say, not with how to say it. And what he has to say issues forth in a torrential stream of ideas which often suffocates unwary swimmers.

Of course, it is a difficult task for a writer to venture upon the criticism of a poet of almost contemporaneous times, for the distance that is necessary for a proper perspective, is absent. But the attempt, as it is, is indeed necessary. For it suggests at least a line of approach to Abercrombie's poetry and offers the reader a helpful commentary thereon. The writer of this book believes that though Abercrombie has suffered undeserved neglect at the hands of his contemporaries, his poetry is still alive, and that it deserves a careful and reverential study.

Life and Work

Sure is his fame, sure as the intrepid gust
That gave us back the grand Marlovian line,
Reincarnating loves of mythic years.

—*E. H. W. Meyerstein*

It is one thing to approach a poet through his life, and it is quite another to approach his life through his poetry. Each approach has its own merits, and even in the latter case, a life-sketch of the author, however brief it may be, has its own advantages. It not only acts as an effective check on hasty conclusions regarding the poet's life (based on a study of his poetry) but also serves as a helpful guide in interpreting his poetry aright.

Lascelles Abercrombie was the sixth son of a stock-broker William Abercrombie, by name, and he was born on 9 January 1881 at The Manor House, Ashton-upon-Mersey in Cheshire, near Manchester. He was a younger brother of Leslie Patrick Abercrombie, an architect and writer of great repute, and it is possible that the home provided a favourable environment for the young Lascelles to become in the fulness of time a great poet and critic.

From his early years, Abercrombie was devoted to books. His teachers encouraged him to develop his love for literature, and his home promoted 'his natural buoyancy and gaiety'. Again this young 'Nous'—that was his domestic nickname—derived much inspiration from H. M. Draper, the headmaster of the Preparatory School at Locker's Park, Hemel Hempstead, which he first joined. Presently he received a strictly scientific education, which, generally speaking, is not conducive to the growth of the poetic genius. During 1895–1900, he studied at

the Malvern College and later at the Owen's College, Manchester, which was still a constituent college of the federal Victoria University, to qualify himself for a degree in Chemistry Honours. And the discipline received there was invaluable for the future professor, poet and critic. He was drawn to literature instinctively, and he acquired an adequate knowledge of Greek and Latin and read the ancient classics on his own account while at college. No sooner had the literary springs in him been touched, than they began to crave for an outlet. He could not resist the call of literature. He could not pursue his scientific studies with zest. He left the Owen's College after two sessions without taking a degree.

As evidence of his remarkable literary taste and temperament even in the early years of his life, we may quote the description by Dr. Percy Withers of his experience of a radiant Sunday afternoon with the Abercrombies, when Lascelles was a young lad of nine—

“It was a radiant Sunday afternoon, and in a drawing-room flooded with light we all assembled after tea to hear Mr. Abercrombie read from a recently published volume of poems. The poet was Henley, then very much to the fore.

I wondered what Henley could mean to the children, and how the reading would fare in competition with the sunshine and the witchery out of doors. There was neither reluctance on their part, nor truancy! They came not only willingly, not merely as participants in a customary rite, but as eager and determined devotees. And the room—what could have been more befitting such a ceremony? It was equipped with Morris wall-paper, Morris rugs, Morris chintzes, Morris hangings, de Morgan tiles, Rossetti water-colours, and lined with low bookcases filled with comely books. I remember nothing of the poems read; I remember nothing of my reactions to them; what did impress me was the intent and eager face of the youngest of the audience, a boy of nine, straining forward towards the reader in sheer ravishment. That is my first clear and ineffaceable presentment of the boy Lascelles, and it is symbolic, I feel, of his whole life. To the last he was the

hungry child, hungering and thirsting after knowledge, beauty, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are of good report".¹

Thus it is clear that from his childhood Abercrombie possessed a poetical temperament. It is only an accident that he happened to receive a strictly scientific training at college. He indeed owed much to his father, whose death the grateful son bemoaned very much. He said: "I don't think any son owed as much to a father as I owed to mine. Whatever good I do or am, I owe it to him".² However, it is very difficult to trace the growth of Abercrombie's poetic faculties and ascertain accurately to what extent the poet in him was the product of environmental influences. His early poems were published in a small volume entitled "Interludes and Poems" in 1908, when he was twenty-seven. This little volume at once gained for him reputation as rapidly as "Salt Water Ballads" did for Mr. John Masefield. "By 1909 the 'new poet' was a familiar figure in the University Club of Liverpool where town and gown intermingle".³ In 1911, Abercrombie wrote a dramatic poem "The Sale of Saint Thomas", and published it himself as no publisher was forthcoming. But strangely enough, it proved to be one of his best poetic efforts. The public became very enthusiastic over his writings and his 'Emblems of Love', probably the best of his blank verse dialogues, was issued the next year, i.e. in 1912 and it justified the enthusiasm of his admirers. In 1913 he wrote 'Deborah', a play in three acts, and it brought him great fame. Then he associated himself with John Drinkwater, Rupert Brooke and William Wilfrid Gibson in starting "New Numbers", a quarterly magazine, which unfortunately closed publication prematurely on the outbreak of the Great War of 1914. The group broke up and Rupert Brooke went to the War, naming Abercrombie, Gibson and Walter de la Mare as financial beneficiaries to his literary estate. In fact, ever since Abercrombie left the Owen's College, literary journalism seemed to have been his mainstay for a number of years. He wrote leaders for the "Liverpool Courier" till 1910

¹ English, Autumn 1943, p. 175.

² Ibid p. 174.

³ *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. XXV, p. 396.

and he was nourishing his poetic genius, trying his hand at various literary forms.

But his domestic troubles increased with a growing family and falling finances. "He had been wracked with domestic troubles, first the illness and enfeeblement of one of his children, and later a serious operation on his wife, the trials of a nursing-home miles away, and succeeding months of gravest apprehension, over and above a lingering and tormented convalescence".¹ In 1915 Abercrombie volunteered to work under the Lord Derby Scheme, but was rejected on account of his deficient sight. But, fortunately, during the autumn of 1916, he could once more go back to Liverpool with his family to serve as inspector of a shell factory. He worked in that capacity for two years and six months. There Abercrombie had to work from 7-30 a.m. to 8 p.m.—on his feet all the time except for one or two half-hour breaks. This must have been an uncongenial task for him, with long hours, confined employment and insufficiency of fresh air and exercise. Even in such adverse circumstances, the urge in him for poetic utterance was irresistible and he once again turned in the nights on work, after his own heart,—creative writing. He told Dr. Withers in a letter: "So I have been sticking to my desk like a limpet every night from ten to one for six weeks or so".² W. W. Gibson, in a poem entitled 'The Golden Room', refers to Abercrombie thus:

"And nigh as ruthlessly has life divided
Us who survive; for Abercrombie toils
In a black Northern town, beneath the glower
Of hanging smoke....."³

In 1919 the public of Liverpool recognized his literary merits and resolved that such gifts as Abercrombie's should not be left to the meagre hours of leisure after uncongenial professional work, but should be enlisted in the service of the University there. A post was specially created for him in the University. A lectureship in poetry was instituted when certain wealthy citizens guaranteed a sum sufficient for maintaining the

¹ English, Autumn 1943, p. 178.

² Ibid.

³ *Poems of Twenty Years*, Edited by M. Wollman (Methuen), p. 207.

post for four years. The inspector of the local shell factory with no academic experience or qualifications, was thus chosen to fill the new chair and it proved to be turning point in his career.

Since 1919 Abercrombie successively held a number of high posts in various Universities. He was Lecturer in Poetry in the University of Liverpool for over three years (1919-22). He was Professor of English Literature for over seven years (1922-29) in the University of Leeds, where, in the words of Sir Michael Sadler, the then Vice-Chancellor, he distinguished himself by his 'wide and winning influence which he exerted during the tenure of the chair'.¹ He also worked as Hildred Carlile Professor of English Literature in the University of London and as Lecturer in Fine Arts (Poetry) at Queen's University, Belfast. From 1935 he occupied the Goldsmiths' Readership in English in the University of Oxford.

As a Professor, he was concerned more with directing the interest of his students to the essential greatness of the writers with whom he dealt rather than to cumbersome details. It was really difficult for his listeners to forget the constant impressiveness or the occasional vehemence with which he recommended his theories. "His eloquence caught the audience at a disadvantage; you could not question, you wished not to demur, you yielded wisely and gladly to his masculine persuasive force."²

Abercrombie's achievement in the dramatic field is remarkable for quality as well as quantity. He published "Deborah" in 1913, "Four Short Plays" in 1922, "Phoenix" in 1923 and "The Sale of Saint Thomas" (in six acts) in 1931. This last was an entirely re-written and much enlarged version of the pamphlet of 1911. "Twelve Idyls" (1928) are not plays but dramatic poems. They were written in blank verse, and dramatic dialogue was Abercrombie's fortè!

From professor-poet to literary critic was a natural transition. As the poet grew older, his creative faculty became weaker. Moreover, with Abercrombie, constant lecturing to University students gradually made him change from poetry to

¹ *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1939, p. 406.

² Bookman, October 1926, p. 9.

criticism. We find early promise of the critic in him as early as 1912, when he wrote his book on Hardy, and 1914 when he wrote on "The Epic". But his most important critical works came out in quick succession after he became a lecturer. His occupation provided him with periods of leisure now. But ill-health and a feeling of dissatisfaction with his literary output incapacitated him for creative work. The popular view referred to in the "Times Literary Supplement" that 'circumstances discouraged the poet and fostered the critic' was not without a basis in fact. After a careful study of his critical writings one can describe Abercrombie as the eloquent exponent of an eclectic theory of art. He sought sanction for his views on various occasions from the authority of many great names—Aristotle, Bacon, Kant and Croce, though, as he himself says, the same names would elsewhere make excellent missiles to pelt him with.¹ Almost all his critical works dealt with aesthetic theory. A chronological list of his works is given in an appendix.

To be a professor, poet and critic simultaneously is a real distinction. Abercrombie shared this distinction with only a few others among his contemporaries—Herbert Read, Edmund Blunden, Robert Graves, Ralph Hodgson, A. E. Housman and Charles Williams. The literary achievement of Lascelles Abercrombie was remarkable. But he was modest. He always cherished a scholar's contempt for publicity and advertisement. His works were not collected and published till 1930. The Oxford University Press did him the honour of including his works in the 'Oxford Poets' series even while he was alive, the only other poet that had earned the distinction being Robert Bridges. As John Drinkwater says, "the Oxford Press, in electing him to follow Robert Bridges as the only living poet to be represented in classic company, made an enlightened choice".² Abercrombie richly deserved his academic honours. He prized most highly the honorary D. Litt. Degree of the Cambridge University. He was selected to deliver the Leslie Stephen Lecture at Cambridge in 1929, and the British Academy Annual Shakespeare Lecture in 1930. He was a member of the 'English Association' and, finally, a year before

¹ Abercrombie, *Towards a Theory of Art*, p. 10.

² John Drinkwater, *Discovery*, p. 218.

his death, he was elected to the British Academy. He wrote: "It was a great honour—and I must say a great surprise; I never thought of the F.B.A. coming my way".¹

Abercrombie has not left many 'causeries' on individual authors. His articles on Poets like Tennyson and Browning are interesting. Professor Oliver Elton says: "Abercrombie was young enough to be detached from the 'Victorians', and near enough to them to do them justice".² That is why Abercrombie's estimates 'are all clear-cut, as if in black and white, praising warmly and blaming sharply'.³ He contributed to many journals and to the Dictionary of National Biography. "The Independent Review", "The Albany Review", "The Poetry Review", "Georgian Poetry", "XIX Century and After", "British Journal of Psychology" and "Cornhill Magazine" were among the journals to which he contributed. He did much useful work for "The Year's Work in English Studies" for 1923, for 1925-6 and 1930.

Abercrombie did his best to run his life both wisely and prudently, and to enjoy the maximum happiness it could afford. He was married on 23 January 1909, at the age of 28, to Miss Catherine Gwatkin who had been an art student in the University of Liverpool. After marriage, the Abercrombies stayed for about two years in Birkenhead and afterwards migrated south to Much Marcle in Herefordshire and then to 'The Gallows' at Ryton which is in the heart of Masefield's Daffodil Fields, near Dymock in Gloucestershire. Though often in great straits, with a growing family, the Abercrombies were happy. The home and the life in the countryside were sources of a special inspiration for him. It may be useful to quote here the interesting description by Dr. Withers of Abercrombie's abode at Ryton, of the life he led and of his habits as a poet.

'The Gallows' and its situation gave Lascelles the home he wanted. He loved its loneliness, its peace, the starkness of its simplicity, the rolling country, the red soil, the narrow lanes that were to the stranger sheer bewilderment. In the near

¹ *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1939, p.417.

² *Ibid* p. 411.

³ *Ibid* p. 411.

distance northward the Malvern Hills rose impressively from a plain that stretched as far as eye could see southward, and away beyond it, blue and spectral, the shapely mass of the Cotswolds. It was indeed an ideal setting for a life dedicated to poetry, and Lascelles' delight in it, his hungry zest in everything it gave, was a day-long renewal. Nothing of the country-side escaped him. Whether its wild life or the changing lights on hill or valley. He knew the farm-labourers and their homes, drank their home-brewed drinks, stored their sayings, and eagerly recounted the native phrases and dialect words he had treasured.

'The Gallows' stood on a knoll so high and so steep that cycling along in one direction its presence would never have been suspected. It was two cottages converted into one. To my last visit I could never be sure of the whereabouts of Lascelles' den—a recent unlovely addition—lined with disordered books, and furnished as far as I remember with a commodious desk and two comfortless chairs. It was a work-room and played the part uncompromisingly. I believe the hours Lascelles chiefly spent there were at night, and late into the night. Books poured in from four regular sources for review, and this journalism, which he took seriously, would probably be done at various hours of the twenty-four, as urgency or the mood decided, but for his chosen work midnight oil and the silence of the sleep-time were apparently the indispensable conditions. He acquired the habit of late hours after leaving school, and to whatever uses it was put, whether in searching the minds of the great dead or in exploring his own, retained it to the end of life. The customary hour for bed was two o'clock; on festal nights such as those spent in the company of Kant, of which his own words shall tell later, it might be four o'clock and daybreak.¹

He had an 'ever-growing' library and it included "English literature old and new, Greek and Latin classics, French and Italian and Spanish books, works on philosophy and several rarities".² Abercrombie had a learned man's aversion to town life. We have the evidence of his own words

¹ English, Autumn 1943, p. 176.

² *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1939, p. 416.

to show how great was his delight in country life in Gloucestershire and in the company of friends and cider—"cider liberally laced with rum, cider which was pert and the rum which was potent". He would say :

"Well, I have had my innings. I have lived in a cottage in the daffodil country, and I have for a time, done what I wanted to do, or very nearly. ... I have lived in Gloucestershire, and I have known what it is to have Wilfrid Gibson and Robert Frost for my neighbours; and John Drinkwater, Rupert Brooke, Edward Thomas, Will Davies, Bob Trevelyan, Arthur Ransome, have drunk my cider, and talked in my garden. I make no cider now, and I have no garden. But once I lived in Gloucestershire."¹

But the end was not in Gloucestershire, in long and fireside meditations, but in London.

His professional life in Liverpool, Leeds, London and Oxford could not, however, satisfy the secret and unquenchable desire of his heart—the composition of great poetry. But this did not mean that his life was embittered by failure and disappointment. As Dr. Withers points out :

"He generated too much enjoyment within himself, loved too wisely and too well, to be overborne, by contrary influences. Besides, his occupation, however distasteful, brought him many of the things he most valued—congenial companionship, the long leisure of vacations, the satisfied craving for knowledge, freedom from pecuniary embarrassment and a generous allowance of home and children."²

His spare eager figure matched his mind and his talk was intensely bracing. His friends found in his visions a harmonious blend of breadth and balance. Dr. Withers continues :

"He won delight not as other men, coolly, and in a few things, but intensely, and wheresoever his ardent spirit led him. Was it not Cowper who vowed he had never enjoyed anything a little? So it was with Lascelles, in range and in measure greater than I have ever known. His delight in so many things can only mean that he brought to them the same compelling evocation he brought to friendship. And

¹ John Cawsworth, *Ten Contemporaries*, pp. 20-1.

² English, Autumn 1943, pp. 180-1.

to friendship his giving was beyond estimation. and beyond price."²

In November 1936 after having worked for a time as Goldsmiths' Reader and Fellow of Merton at the Oxford University. he moved with his family to The Barn House, North Moreton, Didcot, Berks. In May 1938, he was in the Acland House where it is said he whiled away his time in reading translations from Pushkin. But he fell seriously ill in his fifty-eighth year and on 27 October 1938 he died in London in the hospital of St. John and St. Elizabeth.

Shorter Poems

I through my throat the thronging melodies
Delicately devising in divers moods,
Let my little breath lavishly chime,
Still the bestower of unstinted song.

—Lascelles Abercrombie

Abercrombie's early poems were first published in a small volume entitled, *Interludes and Poems*, in 1908, when the poet was twenty-seven. If we leave the Interludes, there are sixteen poems in that volume. Of them, fifteen are fairly short, while the other "Indignation: an Ode" is fairly long. All of them have great lyrical promise and some of them deal with the poet's emotional experiences, at once metaphysical and psychological. They seek to represent something more than the joy of the obvious. In a way, Abercrombie resembles Meredith or Browning, in his mode of abstruse thinking. But his themes are not the same as theirs. All the poems dealt in this chapter are subjective in character. They give artistic expression to single emotional experiences and they have occasional verbal melodies that catch our ears and capture our imagination. Excepting the odes, these poems can be classified as lyrics. Strictly speaking, the term *lyric* can be applied to many classes of poetry which are neither narrative nor dramatic. A lyric proper is a song and it is written so that it may be sung. It is not limited to any basic pattern of metre or form of stanza or even rhyme. But it usually keeps regular accent and hence regular metre, because it is intended to be sung. But its main application is to poetry which is subjective in character. We may call these short poems of Abercrombie, literary lyrics as they aim at being read and not sung, though

they retain the qualities of song in varying degrees. They cannot, as a rule, be set to music. However, they have a verbal melody and they appeal to the reader's ears and capture his imagination. Their chief characteristic feature is that they are the quintessence of momentary moods garnered into words.

i. Soul and Body

"Soul and Body" is a dialogue exquisitely lyrical in character and highly typical of the poet's manner of thinking. The Body complains with good reason that after many 'married years', the Soul is for breaking faith. The body cannot understand why the Soul is apparently sick of the long and delightful period of their association, though the Soul is not unaware that much of their joy has been contributed by the Body through her physical senses. In the words of the Body:

"Thou wilt miss the wonder I have made for thee
Of this dear world with my fashioning senses,
The blue, the fragrance, the singing, and the green."¹

The colourful and pulsating phenomena of life's experience undoubtedly have been the gifts of the senses. The Body therefore invites the Soul to try her again that they may together look upon the world exultingly. The Soul owes a deep debt of gratitude to the body. But the Soul cannot be thankful for all the services rendered by the Body, for the following reason:

"As if fires had made me clean,
I come out of thy experience,
Thy blue, thy fragrance, thy singing, and thy green,
Passions of love, and most, that holy fear."²

The Soul simply finds that the life of the senses is an experience preparatory to that of super-conscious bliss. The Soul has now experienced 'a fiercer kind of joy' which transcends all self-consciousness, knowledge and feeling. She is not tardy of recognizing the fact that this transcendental bliss has also reached her through sense experience. Now that she sees the light of dimly felt ecstasy, she is intent upon soaring beyond the senses, beauty and fear, beyond wonder even. She

¹ *Poems*, p. 3.

² *Poems*, p. 4.

is for a super-conscious bliss unconnected with earth or heaven, hope or desire. In this mood of bliss, the poet loses his own identity and becomes completely oblivious of all ego :

“I want neither earth nor heaven,
I will not have ken or desire,
But only joy higher and higher
Burning knowledge in its white fire,
Till I am no more aware
And no more saying ‘I am I’
But all is perfect ecstasy.”¹

ii. Trance

In a poem called “Trance”, Abercrombie takes us into the depths of his mystical consciousness. The experience described in the poem, while being strictly personal, has a universal appeal, for it is in some such trance that primitive man must have discovered the existence of ‘fixt law’. “In the *Trance*, the mind is released from the reign of mundane Law and finds its perfection in knowing and in being—Nothing; and that is to be ‘in the midst’ of God.”² One night lying alone upon a hill with his ‘drudged sense aching in amaze’, the poet felt the inconceivable room of the blue night—‘the blue that seems so near to be, appearance of divinity’—and the continual stars entering into his thoughts. Inspired by the permanence of heavenly phenomena, he was very much agitated by the vastness and rigidity of the law whose unalterable fence encompasses the suns and the stars. Face to face with the grandeur of the work of God, the poet lost all sense of distinction between great and small. From the vantage position, beyond space and consciousness, he realized that he was in the midst of God :

“A sudden justice vindicated me
From the customary wrong of Great and Small.
I stood outside the burning rims of place,
Outside that corner, consciousness.
Then was I not in the midst of thee,
Lord God?”³

¹ Ibid.

² *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1939, p. 400.

³ *Poems*, p. 5.

iii. Ceremonial Ode

As a writer of Odes, Abercrombie follows the irregular Pindaric type. His "Ceremonial Ode" intended for the University belongs to that type. It has a lofty message to give. A University should enable its students to hold their minds high without entangling themselves in the labyrinths of earthly interests. It should give them an opportunity to live constantly in the wide and free atmosphere of 'Eternity'. It is here that Abercrombie gives the true contrast between the eternity of man's creative spirit and war.¹ He defines the true function of a University to be

"to build exultingly
High, and yet more high,
The knowledgeable towers above base wars."²

iv. All Last Night

This is a fine lyrical poem of four stanzas. It deals with the dream of a lover. His lady-love puts her arm round his neck and she becomes his Sabbath. He feels the warmth of his dream and enjoys the fragrance of her hair or the rose in it. He thinks her hair is like woodruffe :

"Her hair, I think; for likest
Woodruffe 'twas, when Spring
Loitering down wet woodways
Treads it sauntering"³

Yes, it is a happy time for the lover. There is no light and no speech, but the warmth of her arm round his neck and the fragrance of her hair about him. His ecstasy is in her warmth and in silence.

v. December 31st

This short poem of two stanzas is conceived by the poet in one of his fanciful moods. He is already vexed with the cruelty and harlotry in the world. So, just before the dawn of a New Year, the poet imagines that the devil is swinking or toiling in

¹ A. Chakravarthi, *The Dyiasts and Post-war Age Poetry*, p. 173.

² *Poems*, p. 7.

³ *Ibid* p. 8.

Hell with a view to forge a cunning New Year. The poet says that the restless enginery the devil is forging, namely, mill and harrow and rake and the enginery of men and women, is the machinery to *make* cruelty and harlotry.

vi. Hope and Despair

The poet regards Hope and Despair as sisters and angels of God. According to him, God sends them among men to do His work. He bestows upon each a badge, a gold one for Hope and a silver one for Despair. Despair puts on the silver badge of stars while Hope wears the badge of the golden ears of corn, round her temples. The poem concludes with the question, "Which think ye lookt the more fair?"

Both are God's instruments. Hope represents happiness or near fulfilment. Despair represents adversity or remote fulfilment. The ears of corn promise something which is ripened or ready or near fulfilment, while the stars which are remote symbolise a remote object or goal, something perfect but not within reach, but something that one should achieve. So, the balanced answer is that both of them look equally fair. Even Despair is Hope for what may be achieved in the long run.

vii. Roses Can Wound

This poem is conceived under fine metaphysical idea. According to the poet, Roses can wound or do harm. But the harm they do is not by the thorns they have. Roses represent the most beautiful and attractive objects on earth. They can be, as the poet rightly imagines, sources of fear, pain, or alarm, or even sorrow.

The second stanza gives a clue to the poet's rather difficult metaphysical idea conveyed in the metaphor that 'Roses can wound'. He explains that all phenomena are the mere outcome of sense-perception, while the essential truth is the ineluctable infinite, which he calls 'bared' or undisguised eternity of which the 'appearance' is due to the clouded evidence of the senses. The 'mist of sense', as Abercrombie puts it, can *divide*, can, in its operation, present a different aspect, necessarily finitizing the object. But this 'mist of sense' wherein the soul goes shielded or enveloped, cannot hide the mastery of 'bared

eternity' over the appearance of any beautiful object, be it a rose or a girl. Therefore, the poet says, when such thoughts arise often times, during the starry-sheen or moon'd night in the presence of his beloved girl, he feels a deep alarm, deep in his soul. The fear or alarm is due to his ultimate analysis of the beautiful object, be it girl or rose, as unreal and nothing but an illusion.

The truth behind it is this. While man may in his practical life be engaged with material things, in his understanding and theoretical activity he is not engaged with real things at all but with his own ideas. Therefore, the phenomenal world, dealing with differences and finite bodies, is only the result of our approach through our senses which act only as a mist. Though the *mist* gives a different appearance to an object, it cannot really hide the mystery of eternity. A realisation of this necessarily causes alarm and it is in this sense that roses can wound.

viii. The Fear

The poem deals with a scientific idea leading to a highly ethical and metaphysical conclusion. The poet describes here that in days of yore a 'dragon flock' (a flock of monsters like crocodiles or snakes, with wings and claws and often breathing fire) went over the muddy shores of Earth. This is the primitive stage of evolution. Time went on and the terrifying fact became completely obliterated. But on laborious excavation of the rocks, the poet says, the facts about that grim race can be found out and men are startled with 'amazed shock'. Some traces are left now, on such an exploration, along the margin of man's early consciousness though the early memories of terror are mostly buried. Even though man explores it boldly now, he shudders with fear to find the tracks of his old way. The sequence of thought is rather difficult to follow. "The outer twilight regions" refer to the evolved man. As the poet now tries to penetrate deep into the interior of man's being, he only discovers the old 'dragon' in him, however civilised he be, in the light of evolution. In other words, the poet fears that man in spite of the polish of civilisation and scientific advancement he has acquired, still persists in the 'detested tracks of his old way!' This may even apply to the early memories of

childhood and traces (in the adolescent mind) of the sub-conscious fears experienced then.

ix. Indignation: an Ode

This is the second ode which Abercrombie has attempted. The Greek word 'ode' means literally, song. It differs from his lyrics in being, much longer, graver and more subdued in its emotion and more thoughtful and reflective. Unlike the ancient Greek ode which has a fixed and elaborate verse form, Abercrombie's ode resembles the modern English ode with its irregular metre which changes with the changes of his mood. Strictly speaking, the ode is supposed to be addressed to some person or thing or idea.

Abercrombie's ode is an invocation of righteous anger against the wretched conditions of the labourers' lives in mills, yards and factories. Twentieth-century England was, until recently, in a deplorable condition. The chief causes of its untold misery were the cruelty of men and women towards their fellow-beings, the sham creeds of rich men, the supreme indifference on the part of Government and society towards the poorer classes and cut-throat competition in matters of trade and business. Even in the days of Tennyson, conditions were bad and the Victorian Laureate cried in vain in bitter anguish, when he witnessed the slums and the down-trodden wretches left to the mercy of their ruthless employers:

“There among the gloomy alleys Progress halts on palsied
feet,
Crime and hunger cast our maidens by the thousand on the
street,
There the master scrimps his haggard sempstress of her
daily bread,
There a single sordid attic holds the living and the dead,
There the smouldering fire of fever creeps across the rotted
floor,
And the crowded crouch of incest in the warrens of the
poor”¹

Abercrombie also must have been inspired with at least the same degree of humanism, when he composed the ode on

¹ Locksley Hall, *Sixty Years After*.

Indignation. In this poem, he exposes the evils of a capitalist civilization and its inherent antagonism to spiritual life. Poets, whom we rightly regard as true representatives of the human race, generally long for a better-ordered and happier world. So they often build what Sir Henry Newbolt would call 'Divine, Climes'. Shelley's 'Prometheus Unbound', Plato's 'Republic' and Sir Thomas More's 'Utopia' flash on our minds in this connection. Has Abercrombie also pictured to us a New World in this poem, "Indignation: an ode"? He has not. But it is clear that he is one with Shelley in his denunciation of the present order of things and in his desire for a better order of life. Abercrombie's wrath against things that ought to go, reminds us also of the fierceness of Milton as evinced in one of his sonnets, "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont", and also of the zeal of the Old Testament Prophets.

"Indignation: an ode" is at once daring and dignified. It is an emphatic and indignant protest against a crazy civilization that has dislocated the whole of the Social structure and perpetrated a crime against humanity in the dignified name of progress, founding itself on the vacuous blessings of labour-saving machines. Abercrombie is shocked at the horrid picture of the havoc wrought by industrial civilization. The harrowing tale of the misery of the workers is the direct result of our own acts of ugliness and wickedness. That is why Abercrombie cries in despair and anguish at the unseemly sight of defiled mankind. The poor souls are

"for the wrong we did, who made them poor,
Set to infamous penalties in jails."¹

The mind of man which Abercrombie calls the once beautiful garden of the spirit is now

"Trampled and staled and trodden filthily
By troops of insolence, the beasts of Hell",²

on account of the "built inequities" and the stupid greed of modern civilization, we have developed an unpardonable callousness which contemplates the distresses of our fellow-men with complacency of indifference. Foundries, furnaces and factories, says Abercrombie, have become the fashionable

¹ *Poems* p. 13.

² *Ibid* p. 12.

features of modern life, in spite of the incalculable misery which they mean for the workers. Our laws are framed not for the general good of mankind but for the benefit of the privileged few. And they wound thousands of distressed hearts. Our commerce ruins millions of care-worn souls and makes brutes of men by catching them in its inescapable net. We are consciously driving the majority of the human race to poverty, ill-health, vice and crime. Therefore the poet cries in utter anguish :

“And shall there be no end to life’s expense
In mills, yards and factories,
With no more recompense
Than sleep in warrens and low styes,
And undelighted food?”¹

These are the lines which give explicit utterance to the humanism which roused Abercrombie to righteous indignation. As a Latin proverb goes, ‘indignation makes verses’, and Abercrombie’s poem is certainly the expression of his hatred for all kinds of evil. It also reflects his enthusiasm for good and noble things. He is sorry that, on account of the perverse conditions of modern life, we have been emasculated and so accept the injuries done to us by others, in a spirit of weak fatalism. But unlike many poets who are content with a passive study of life, Abercrombie violently takes sides against modern civilization. He points out its gravest errors and lays bare in the plainest terms its morbid and vicious aspects.

How does Abercrombie account for all this misery? The poet tells us that there was an anger among men in olden days and that it was in the form of a sword kept in the hands of the Spirit, whose duty it was as ‘the Captain of the Lord’, to maintain peace and order in the world by destroying the villainy, greed and fraud in His path. As long as the sword of indignation was in the hands of the Spirit, the vices of the world, the evil brood of Hell, were kept to their den, and virtue reigned supreme on Earth. The poet feels that now, in the present world, the Spirit is rendered powerless, having lost its weapon, the scimitar. (Abercrombie spells it ‘scimeter’.)

¹ Ibid p. 13.

"There is no indignation among men,
The Spirit has no scimeter".¹

In other words, the poet indicates that the ancients cherished a keener sense of right and wrong than the modern men, and considered it their sacred duty to redress the wrongs of the world and preserve virtue. The weapon of righteous indignation was always ready in their ethical armoury to be used for the establishment of a reign of virtue and justice. Modern man, says Abercrombie, is caught in the trap of a baffling civilisation which has fostered in him a sort of callousness towards the evils of life. It has incapacitated him from perceiving evil. Even when he is able to perceive it, he is made to reconcile himself readily with it. Thus man has reduced himself to a pitiable plight from which there seems to be no escape.

Abercrombie, however, is not a misanthrope. He is not so pessimistic as to think that life shall always be a dark calamity. There is indeed a way out. There should be a revolution in men's minds and thoughts. The cultured and enlightened reformers should have faith in themselves and induce faith in others so that the world may be a fit place for all to live in freely and fearlessly. They should strive for spiritual progress and not material progress, and should re-establish the primacy of the human spirit. Then alone can we soar higher in the scale of God's creation. Abercrombie thus looks forward to the day when the sword of righteous indignation will return and cut off the existing ills in society, when the spirit will once more be active and bring about a sort of 'golden havoc'. Once again the Spirit would destroy the walls of vice, now confining Him, and come out triumphantly handling the wrathful blaze to cut off 'the built inequities' of the world.

The Spirit would then be able to shatter to pieces 'the clumsy unlit shed' of industrial civilisation. Then our money, 'our happy greed', 'our healthy wrong', 'our villainous prosperity' and 'the iron scurf-labour', will all perish in a moment. The Spirit shall walk again like a sacred king in the immortal world, purifying the life of men and re-establishing the reign of golden piece. Thus the poet unfolds the hopeful vision of

¹ *Poems* p. 10.

a world of Truth and Beauty, inaugurating a new era of justice, fair-play and harmony.

This belief that Abercrombie has in the approaching dawn of a 'golden havoc' seems to be slightly over-drawn. But still, we must have idealists to dream of the perfect man. Their dreams are a source of inspiration for the race. Abercrombie's optimism is not a triumphant 'all is right with the world', but a confident 'all shall be right with the world!' Here in lies the essential difference between the optimism of Browning and that of Abercrombie. It may be compared more appropriately to Shelley's optimism expressed in the concluding lines of the "Ode to the West Wind":

"The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If winter comes, can spring be far behind?"

In this connection, it is interesting to note how his friend Wilfrid Gibson reacted to the same conditions of labour. Gibson's is only a formal indictment of the evils of industrial civilisation. We cannot fail to note that it is at the same time a commemoration of fine feelings like love, courage, fortitude and loyalty which persist in the men operating the machine. We may even say that Gibson's poetry is almost a carefully worded reply to Abercrombie's ode on Indignation. If Abercrombie sang about the soulless misery of industrialism in this poem, Wilfrid Gibson sang about its glory, in the passage beginning with

"If only I had got a job to tackle
I'd bear the working better—a job that left
No time for brooding."¹

x. Inscriptions

Abercrombie wrote three inscriptions, one for the Roll of Honour of the University of Liverpool, the second for the first Anniversary of the Armistice and the third for the War Memorial of the Liverpool Post Office. In the first the poet speaks of those who desired to live but were no more and could not know the splendour of their dying.

We can trace occasional glimpses of Abercrombie's feelings of patriotism in these pieces. Referring to the noblest of all

¹ Wilfrid Gibson, Call (from *Daily Bread*).

epitaphs, written over the graves of the nameless dead at Thermopylae, who are rather symbols, nay 'apetheoses of an accumulated national sentiment', John Drinkwater points out that even today, Lascelles Abercrombie's lines written for the Roll of Honour of the University of Liverpool—survive the test of being set in classic company.¹

"These, who desired to live, went out to death ;
Dark underground their golden youth is lying.
We live ; and there is brightness in our breath
They could not know—the splendour of their dying."²

In the second inscription Abercrombie praises the soldiers who sacrificed their lives in the wars. He says that mountains, stars, clouds, sea-foam, flames, snows and children are examples of loveliness. To add to these, we have another example of loveliness, of course a heart-breaking one, 'the life that willingly dies'. The following lines from the second Inscription,

"Mountains and stars, clouds and the white sea-foam,
Flames, snows, and children—should not these suffice,
But this heart-breaking loveliness must come
Gleaming through all—life that willingly dies?"³

are full of heart-breaking loveliness.

In the third inscription, the poet describes the departed souls "presiding over us like stars over the night". They red immortal in their death.

xi. R. B.

This poem, as Mrs. Abercrombie informs me,⁴ is addressed to Rupert Brooke. Abercrombie says that the young poet has been a great lover of all beautiful things. He calls R.B.'s life a beautiful life because

"As air delights to find
The white heat of a fire and to be flame,
The eager world throng'd into his glowing mind
And flame of burning beauty there became."⁵

¹ John Drinkwater, *Patriotism in Literature*.

² *Poems*, p. 14.

³ *ibid* p. 15.

⁴ Letter, 5 March 1945.

⁵ *Poems*, p. 15.

Abercrombie's authority for this statement is Brooke's own poem "The Great Lover" (written in 1914) which is of great autobiographical significance. In it, the young poet says that he has lived his life on earth with the keenest enjoyment of all its beauty and loveliness. He gives us a catalogue of the things he has loved with such intensity and feeling, that he has almost forgotten the fact of death and the silence of the grave. Hence in the words of Abercrombie :

"All things were turned to fire in him, and cast
The light of their transfiguring round his ways.
His secret gleamed upon us ; where he past
He shone ; he brought with him a golden place."¹

The objects of Brooke's love are a miscellaneous assortment of common things from which most of us derive some passing satisfaction or the other. China with its delicate pattern and glassy smoothness, fine dust settled on furniture, shining wet roofs by lamplight, old hardened crust of bread, dew-drops on flowers, rough woollen blankets, glossy blank hair, clouds, machines, friendly fingers, natural sights and sounds—these are some of the many objects of Brooke's love. All these things were turned to fire in Rupert Brooke's imagination. Abercrombie praises the transforming power of Brooke's consciousness in an admirable way :

"It was the purest fire of life that shone,
This angel brightness visiting our mould.
Life knew no way to make life lovelier, none ;
But then came Death : 'I know the way.
Behold !'"²

xii. White Love

In this poem, Abercrombie describes how all love and all desire find their fulfilment in the dispassionate and disinterested period of old age, when experience matures and ripens into wisdom. Then under the grand marble white structure of speculation, the poet intends to hold a feast and secretly entertain his desire. There he will find white goblets filled with white wine !

¹ Ibid p. 15.

² *Poems*, p. 15.

xiii. The Nightingale

The subject matter of this short poem is taken from an old English riddle. It is a bird that is speaking. It says that it sings in diverse moods and brings blissful ease to all of its listeners. It attracts people resting in the houses, to lean forward and listen to its 'sweet troubles', and be enthralled.

The poem is only in the form of a riddle, and bears no comparison with the poem of Keats on the nightingale.

xiv. The Stream's Song

"The Stream's Song" is the best of Abercrombie's lyrics. The lyric strain of the poem is not impeded by any kind of mystic dialecticism. The subject-matter of the poem felicitously harmonises with the manner of its presentation. In Abercrombie's lyrics, one frequently notices a subordination of lyric beauty to thought. But this poem is an exception. The poem is beautiful, with or without its allegory. The stream bids the thwarting stones make room for her play, with the supreme confidence that her joy will wear out their solemn strength. They will not cumber her play for ever. She will clear her own way amidst the rocks and the boulders with joy and song. The stream feels confident that the faith of the rock must yield to her song of glee.

"No faith can last
That never sings."¹

It is the song that gives permanence to faith. The last hour always belongs to joy and while other things perish, songs remain in immortal glory. The stream, however, is not blind to the need for boulders, as she needs their serious shoulders for her *laughter*. True delight therefore consists in dealing cheerfully with the odd obstacles of life. Delight loses its own intensity with the absence of those obstacles. The stream seems to tell the boulders :

"And when my singing
Has razed you quite,
I shall have lost
Half my delight."²

We find in this poem a Shelleyan touch of ethereality.

¹ *Poems*, p. 17.

² *Poems*, p. 17.

xv. Elizabeth's Song

"Elizabeth's Song" is indeed one of the plainest and most delightful lyrics of Abercrombie, on a theme so common to poets—the influence of Nature on man. The white clouds tangled among cherry trees and the silver-coloured cherries spangled on the hillside, make Elizabeth's heart dance with delight. So also does the endless careering of the swallows in love with their finest plumage. The poem contains a number of full-mouthed harmonies and felicitous turns of musical expression.

xvi. Epitaph

In the Epitaph or the words supposed to be inscribed on the poet's tomb, he says he is satisfied with his life, for he has got all he desired, probably more than he can desire. He feels happy that everything has gone right with him. But after death, he realises that life has played him false and now he knows *Nothing* and has *Nothing*. He is *Perfection*!

Elizabeth Sewell says that Abercrombie's preoccupation with nothingness as the ultimate goal is similar to that of Mallarme. ¹In his poem, *Epitaph*, Abercrombie touches on the idea of nothingness thus :

"I lookt for beauty and I longed for rest,
And now I have perfection : nay, I am
Perfection : I am Nothing, I am dead."²

The word *Nothing* gains the status of an individual in Abercrombie's poetry.

Of all these poems, we can say, "All Last Night", "Hope and Despair", "Indignation: an Ode", "Inscriptions", "R. B." "White Love", "The Stream's Song" and "Elizabeth's Song" are the most beautiful. They possess a haunting loveliness of melody and, here and there, a touch of profound symbolism. The symbolism of "Hope and Despair" is especially moving.

¹ Elizabeth Sewell, *Structure of Poetry*, p.37.

² *Poems*, p.18.

Interludes and The Sale of Saint Thomas

And still God speaks through poets, uttering
Ever new Universes when they sing.

—Wilfrid Gibson

In these writings, Abercrombie seeks to enquire into the mysteries of existence by adopting a sort of dialectic or dialogue form, which is the best suited for an exposition of views relating to spiritual perceptions. He calls it the 'Interlude'. Originally the 'Interlude' was a short piece introduced as comic relief between two scenes in the Moralities and Mysteries, but in course of time, it detached itself from them and became a literary form by itself. Dramatisation of an anecdote and simplicity in construction are the chief qualities of an interlude. Interludes were often staged by household servants. Theatrical performances came much later. But none of Abercrombie's 'Interludes', not even his "Emblems of Love" or "The Sale of Saint Thomas", is intended for the stage. His interludes are not designed for comic relief, like the primitive interlude. On the other hand, their purpose is to excite serious cogitation. They may be called 'dramatic poems' as distinguished from 'poetic drama'. They are all strictly speculative dialogues – a name which Abercrombie has given to one of his prose works, and they reveal the great speculative philosopher in Abercrombie. His 'Interludes' (which, as he tells us, were experiments), hover between the 'Morality' and the interlude proper, seeking apparently by their arresting denouement to drive home some quasi-philosophical conception evolved from sundry musings on Nature for the

most part. Nature is not, as with Wordsworth, the nurse of the poet's moral being, but a cold elusive power existing in splendid isolation among hills and vales and coming into men's lives to reveal to them their inmost being. Such revelation releases no moral fervour, but provides only a vision as bleak as the hills themselves. Since language 'finds its most expressive use in poetry'¹, the poetical medium of expression is adopted in the 'Interludes', and we have in them many graphic and memorable turns of expression that are reminiscent of Browning at his best.

His five 'Interludes' and "The Sale of Saint Thomas" (though styled 'a play in six acts') are a group of dramatic poems bearing the impress of a common purpose and setting forth a metaphysical approach to the problems of life. Prof. Oliver Elton says: "He read much philosophy, not for the sake of any formal system, but as a poet reads it, for whatever might fire his imagination or point to some satisfying creed. He is for ever circling round the ancient problems; the nature of beauty, the place of love in life and in the universal order, the possible union of the individual self with the One, and the attendant mystery of evil."²

Abercrombie admits in his preface to his *Collected Poems* (1930) that 'the order of publication does not correspond to the order in which the poems were composed'. It is, no doubt, true that Abercrombie works out no consistent system of philosophy. It is not the business of a poet to do so. But, apparently there seems to be a kind of nexus of thought running through the group of poems included in this chapter because they all deal with definite quests after Truth. But the seekers are different and their methods of approach are also different. In the first 'Interlude' the approach of a devout Christian convert is described. In *Blind*, a tramp's approach to the problem of sin is set forth. It is essentially an ignorant man's point of view, presented with sophistry. In the next poem, the quest of the Seeker who is essentially a scientist, is described and his folly exposed. The fourth poem deals with the quest of a poet who does not like to face life and its problems, but only attempts to

¹ *Poems*, Preface, p. vi.

² *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1939, p. 399.

escape from them. The fifth is the approach of a pagan philosopher who has lived a wicked life, while the last, which is a play in six acts, deals with the philosophy of a saint who is also a prophet. Thus we see a devout Christian, a tramp, a scientist, a poet, a pagan philosopher and a prophet as seekers of Truth. Of all these the achievement of Saint Thomas is the greatest.

i. The New God: A Miracle

Abercrombie examines whether humble devotion to God is a solution to the problem of life. In "The New God: A Miracle", Margaret holds that all desires—even her pure affection for her lover, which is generally considered to be a virtue in the world, are sins. She doubts if going towards the brown tarn's brink were not a sin! Her only motto is: "Best pray again". She believes that a literal following of the first commandment is the only way to salvation and her attitude towards God is that of complete self-surrender: "I am thine.... Art thou not mine?" And in the end, she transcends all sin and obtains salvation.

According to the old legend of Margaret, Olybus, Governor of Antioch, is captivated by the beauty of St. Margaret. He wants to marry her. When she rejects him with scorn, he throws her into a dungeon, where the devil comes to her in the form of a dragon. Margaret holds up the cross and the dragon flies away. The holding up of the cross is symbolic of her ardent faith and the fleeing of the dragon, the retreat or collapse of the wicked forces against her faith. Abercrombie gives us a modified version of the legend, bringing out more fully its metaphysical significance. He tells us how, alone in her room, after evening prayers, a very beautiful girl sits singing to her harp. It is evening, and the moon shines through the mud-built cottage on a lonely isle, within an earshot of the waves of the sea. The air is thick with incense, and all around the cottage spreads a scene of utmost desolation. The cold and damp of the cottage seem to eat into our vitals as we read on. The girl sings of happy days spent among hills and of a tarn in which she would gladly end her days. This is Margaret, the heroine of the piece, who is a princess in her own right and has

been banished to the lonely isle by her irate and most unnatural father, the King, for having become a Christian. In his wrath the King kills the defenceless old man who converts the Princess to the new faith. The king subjects the girl to a great ordeal and tortures her to give up her new faith. He even sends a heathen prince, her lover before her conversion, to plead with her and reclaim her from her new cult. But she stands firm saying, "God loves a soul all anguish". The prince's long address to her is ineffectual. His appeal that Margaret should not aim to turn mankind from gods (heathen gods), carries no weight with her and she rejects his love. She loathes him in spite of her past friendship with him and his present entreaties. She cannot be prevailed upon and the prince has to leave the place threatening to bring her father there.

In the process of her conversion, she has transferred her love to God and she loves Him in the manner prescribed by the first commandment: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind and with all thy strength."¹ Margaret renounces wealth, authority, happiness and earthly love and declares unto God: "I am thine...Art thou not mine?" She has a better Lover whom the prince cannot understand. Faith gives her strength and strength in its turn gives her confidence in the power of God. As regards the prince, she feels that her physical beauty is an irresistible temptation to him and a great hindrance to her spiritual progress. So she prays to God that it should be taken away from her.

"But is it not mislikely for thy weal
That I have beauty?
When I was heathen, I thought it good; but now
Take it from me, O God!"²

The simple faith that cries out "Hear me O, God", and the final prayer to be blessed with ugliness—all show the child-like sweetness of her nature, and God answers:

"Simple this prayer is, smelling sweet to me,
Therefore I take it and begin my power."³

¹ St. Mark 12³⁰.

² *Poems*, p. 34.

³ *Ibid*, p. 35.

God comes to her rescue, and on account of this divine intervention, her father's attempts to awaken wild lust in her through incense and powder end in failure. The prince returns, determined to molest her. He has already drunk 'Metheglin spiced with hot infamous drugs'—the lust-awakening drink supplied by the king, but is now simply overpowered by the holy atmosphere around Margaret! God has begun his work to "unmake" things and the Prince is unable to stand her *divine* presence. He only exclaims :

"This is strange here ;
Can I exist as well as Holiness ?
I?—I have forgotten what was 'I' "¹

and feels he is dying. The King steps into her presence, hot on the Prince's heels, in fond expectation of success but is quickly taken aback at the sight of the Prince lying senseless and dead! He curses it to be a spell or craft but admits that this power outside Nature is more excellent than Nature!

Thus in this legend, Abercrombie illustrates the efficacy of devout faith and the grace attendant on it. The author resorts to a *deus ex machina* and the conclusion is in accordance with the Biblical teaching: "all things are possible to him that believeth."²

ii. Blind

Abercrombie's first effort in poetry is the interlude "Blind" which is indeed a satisfying story in great verse. It was first published and praised in "The Independent Review" (1907), and later in "The Albany Review", and re-issued in the volume, "Interludes and Poems" (1908). The poem mounts up to a tragic conclusion on account of the elemental passions and the spiritual blindness of the characters. The poet deals with out-lawed people, belonging to the lower strata of life. They are swayed by strong passions of love and revenge, and act blindly. This theme gives the author an opportunity to raise the problem of sin and salvation. This problem is the starting point for the quest of the various seekers in the succeeding interludes.

¹ Ibid, p. 36.

² St. Mark, 923.

In this poem Abercrombie's inspiration moves freely, unhampered by the tradition, either of technique or of theme. It is a terrible story of revenge—the crude blind revenge of an out-lawed beggar woman on her lover who deserted her on the eve of her giving birth to a blind son. Her lover, in his blind passion, leads an immoral life. turns tramp and vagabond, and after some years of notorious life becomes physically blind. Meanwhile the revengeful wife deliberately trains her blind son in the art of strangling, so that he may, one day, strangle his own father. But the blind son does not quite appreciate this attitude. He feels he has a soul and he also exhibits symptoms of love for a girl he comes in contact with. He asks his mother if they have blind souls, but she silences him at once saying:

“What is it to you
If you have soul or no? All you are for
Is, when the time comes, and I tell you grip him,
To get the life in his throat under your hands,
And use your thumbs.”¹

Then she tries to poison her blind son with hatred for his father, saying that there is no end to his father's guilt. The son fears that she may turn bitter against him, and as he needs her love, he resolves to play his part when the time comes.

When the mother goes out to beg or steel food, the blind tramp, her lover, comes there seeking shelter and food. He is now a crazy and blind vagabond, but he has considerable skill in words—in fact, words and words alone are all his comfort! The drunken wastrel of a father, soon after arriving there, as though drawn by fate, makes friends with his son without the least knowledge of their relationship. It is a moving scene revealing an uncanny insight into human psychology and a rare mastery of dramatic irony. The two blind persons become intimate with each other, the one seeking skill in words to express his intuitive experiences and the other readily responding to the visitor, with his imagination, irrepressible humour and literary talent.

The poet now puts into the mouth of the tramp a disquisition on words and says that they are messengers of God and

¹ Poems, p. 39.

that 'they emanate from out of God's heart'. He then proceeds to exemplify the effect of one word on him. The blind father and the son begin to talk. In response to the son's request for words that cure the heart the father sings a song. He gives out that it is his composition in a drunken state. It is in this song that the Tramp raises the problem of evil and tries to answer it in his own whimsical manner. He begins the song thus: "Heaven, lay your harps aside, and let Hell speak a bit". He soon proceeds to convert his bitter attack into the voice of Hell,¹ running up to 40 lines. The whole complaint of the Tramp can be compressed into his own sentiment, 'The blossom of your (the good ones) holiness needed our (the bad ones) crimes for dung.....Are not we the nobler, the more honourable we?'

Evil has a place in the world, for it prepares the way for goodness. It almost appears as if the wicked are absolutely essential to provide a field for the workings and practices of the virtuous. This doctrine cannot with any grace be put into the mouth of anybody but the Tramp, a person who after a life of wickedness, has lost his eyes and is assured of an eternity of Hell. His song is full of bitterness against the virtuous. The attack loses its force when it is considered merely as a piece of sophistry. In fact, the contempt with which Abercrombie treats such an explanation for sinning, is evident from the way in which the song is stated to be composed: "A friend of mine was hanged, and I got drunk, Whence this."² The Tramp tries to justify his friend who was hanged, by pressing into service the Theory of Absolute Determinism. He says that the wicked people commit evil actions because they are robbed of their wisdom by God; in other words, they are pre-destined to be sinful and therefore suffer eternally in Hell. The Tramp now argues that the sinners are nobler than the good, since they suffer eternally in Hell, to enable the latter to be happy in Heaven. This is plainly an absurd conclusion. Pre-destination is really a blind alley. The arguments of the Tramp in defence of sin are specious. Abercrombie does not accept them. Of course, the poet

¹ Ibid, p. 50.

² Ibid.

presents the theory of pre-destination here in the poem which he purposefully calls 'Blind'. But its real meaning is missed by those who do not understand the paradox. The conclusion is interpreted by some critics as expressing the poet's view. That is probably why critics like Martin Ellehauge attribute to Abercrombie not only material fatalism but also spiritual fatalism.¹ But we cannot agree with him as we do not fail to notice 'the keen salt humour of it' which establishes, as Mary Sturgeon points out, 'the breadth and sanity of the poet's outlook!'² It is a fact that Abercrombie has infused some of his intellectuality into the character of the Tramp. But the philosophy of the Tramp is not the philosophy of the poet. It is only the poetical rendering of a certain metaphysical pose that the perverted Tramp fancifully assumes. It also defines the role of evil on this earth. It would probably be more correct to believe that Abercrombie's intention is to sound a note of warning against the spiritual blindness of all the three characters in this poem.

Speaking about the tragic conclusion, it may be urged that in spite of her changed attitude in the end (which shows a streak of goodness in things evil), the Mother has been powerless to arrest the irresistible march of the forces of evil that she once wantonly let loose in a blind passion. On her return home, she finds the Tramp and recognises him to be her husband, Michael. She pities him in his present condition, blind, aged and dispirited. She offers to give him comfort and careful attention. She even introduces her son to the Tramp and asks her boy to kiss his father. But the boy does not take notice of the change coming over her. Nor could she explain the change in her own attitude in many words. The lad only takes it to be a cunning way of signalling to him to do her bidding; a veiled suggestion to carry out the wicked deed contemplated before. And he does it accordingly. But, the tragedy leaves her chastened, for she confesses that she has been blinded by revenge and anger and mutters slowly in great sorrow :

¹ Martin Ellehauge—*Striking Figures Among Modern English Dramatists*, p. 91.

² M. C. Sturgeon—*Studies of Contemporary Poets*, p. 26.

“At Judgement Day

Tell them, my child, you did not make his death.

I will not share it. It is all mine.”¹

Even a layman may have philosophic stirrings. The tramp's vagabondage has led him to philosophic thinking. This is a sign that he has ripened in his outlook. He is not a Mephistophelian philosopher. But he believes in the place of evil in the world and lives up to it. He has evolved that philosophy through his life of sin. His theory of words is as profoundly true as that of Browning or Eliot. His theory of evil, whatever it be, seems to be fairly innocuous. The interlude is written with the purpose of expressing a metaphysical idea. But the dramatic and theological points of the argument should not be pressed too far as it is detrimental to a proper perception of the situation and characterisation. The Tramp does not say: ‘Evil, be thou my good’, He says: “Evil be thou my evil.” So, he is not a hypocrite. He is a frank sinner, full of self-knowledge. There are three forms of evil presented in the poem. The boy is physically blind, the mother is morally blind out of hurt and thwarted pride and the father is spiritually blind as he is up in arms against the world and its laws. He even knows the value of good. But he persists in evil because he is made that way. This is to be distinguished from the evil which is secretive, as in Iago. Evil is, of course, caught in its own toils. The irony of circumstance is nothing less than the will of God.

iii. The Fool's Adventure

Once the problem of good and evil and of virtue and sin is introduced, the scene is set for a systematic investigation of the problem. If one commits sin, who is it that prompts one to it? The principle of pre-destination or spiritual fatalism is one solution to the problem, but it deprives mankind of initiative in action. The principle of absolute determinism has therefore to be brushed aside. The problem has to be tackled from a different angle. Since evil actions appear to be prompted by an agent or a *monger*, as Abercrombie calls him (giving

¹ Poems, p. 56.

him a metaphysical status), the quest for the *monger* of good and evil, comes to the fore-front.

Abercrombie deals with this quest in his Interlude, called "The Fool's Adventure". The poet describes in the first two dialogues a certain seeker's quest for the monger of sin in the outside world. In the next two dialogues his search is directed inwardly. To start with, the seeker defines the search. Man alone, of all creation, does things which he labels right and wrong, and suffers for it:

"But like a spilth of oil in the stream
Man's nature the same current flows along
Unmixing in the general kindliness,
Showing like slime against the deep wise water."¹

He is in some obscure way conscious that what he labels as wrong or sin, is the source of his suffering. If possible he wishes to empty himself of sin. In his outlook of the world the poet seems to accept fully the conclusions of modern science. He accepts the continuity of nature:

"I know between all kinds of the world, there are
No layers, no division: stone, leaf, flesh,—
All's flowing, like a stream of many waters."²

Next he accepts Nature's possible destination, a 'heat-death' which the Second Law of Thermodynamics predicts.³ This scientific doctrine is formulated by the Seeker thus:

"I know this growth about me, stones, herbs, beasts;
Starts and their golden games in the blue heaven
I know, and the life that runs through all, and what
It runs towards;—how the grand heats will be
A stupid frost, and all the young lustful matter
Decrepit, gone unhandsomely into crums."⁴

He also accepts the theory of Evolution and says: 'Out of the brutish rose up man'. He contemplates the external world in its reality and asks if there be a Maker of Sin. This attitude is emphasized when he says:

"And nowadays

¹ Ibid, p. 57.

² Ibid.

³ Sir James Jeans—Mysterious Universe, pp. 23–25.

⁴ Poems, p. 70.

Experiment, not musing, is the thing."¹

This is avowedly the attitude of the materialist. And with this outlook, the seeker tries to solve his problem. But as he explains his quest to a hermit, the latter gently hints to him that he has started on a wrong path, by pointing out how he, the hermit, in spite of his habits of solitude and contemplation has been able to know the world more truly than 'little thoughted men' who went abroad. Communion with mountains, rain and streams has enabled him to realise that of all this world there is a Self and the Presence of this Self lies in some region of existence. He locates in this Self of the World the abode of the monger of man's good and bad :

"It may be, we are close to the wheel's rim here,
Touching the hooping tire of forged law,
And things seem separate ; but all, like spokes,
Are towards the nave, and fixt in it at root,
The Self of the World. There is the authority
Of the brook's speed, and of man's Good and Bad."²

This view of the hermit comes nearest in philosophical speculation to the doctrines of the *Upanishads*. The idea of the immanent 'Self' is characteristic Hindu thought. It is difficult to show Abercrombie's acquaintance with Eastern thought, but the parallel is none the less valuable. The idea of the 'Self' as fixed at the root and that

"...all, like spokes
Are towards the nave"

finds a parallel in the following lines of the *Prashna Upanishad* (Second Question, verse, 6) :

"As spokes in the nave of the wheel all are fixed in *Prana* (the Self), *Riks*, *Yajus*, *Samas*, *Sacrifice*, *Kshatriyas* and *Brahmanas*."³

The Seeker feels that it must be tried and the hermit advises him to proceed with his quest through meditation, warning him that his "journeying must be through reigns of mind, rather than lands and tongues" and advises him to know the Self of the World. This is the second stage and the Seeker

¹ Ibid, p. 58.

² Ibid, p. 60.

³ *Prashna Upanishad* – Ramakrishna Matt Edition, p. 29.

seems to achieve his object. After long meditation, he knows the Self of the World. He comes to the conclusion that the 'Emotion' he has in him is in tune with Fate. In other words, the operations of Fate are through the medium of Emotion; for it is said that Fate speaks with Emotion and wakes fellowship as in the unused strings of a harp and makes use of the emotions thus roused to achieve her own purposes. So the Seeker concludes that emotions like love and hatred which drive man to commit sin, are themselves directed by Fate, the emotion of the Self of the World. That is why, the Seeker accuses the Self of the World, of mixing 'sin into Man'. But, the Voice of the World says that it has not mixed sin into Man. Man has got it himself. It is his mind that has introduced the idea of sin. The distinction of good and bad has arisen only on account of his capacity for 'quickenings'. The Seeker gets disappointed and abuses the World as some outer devil. But the latter ridicules him thus:

"Thou freedom, thou high self-acquaintance, thou Sin, Man, dost thou know me? But now know thyself."¹

This leads on to the third stage when the Seeker comes across a Sage to whom he complains against God for being careless, and for bitterly mocking man for sin. The Sage answers him with a parable and concludes with the exhortation:

"Be sure

If anything seems dirt and husk to you,

You're not the man is going to find the Word."²

Thus the Sage plainly hints that the Seeker is quite mistaken in rejecting certain portions of creation as disagreeable to him. This conception of Immanence is not grasped by the Seeker who insists that God should empty man of sin, and complains that He has talked to him unkindly. Then the Sage calls him a poor fool, for presuming to think of the sensible World as God. He now informs the Seeker that the World is only the name that the Lord God chooses to go by and that God has as much connection with it as the meaning of a word has with the letters composing it, or its sound. In other words, God and the World have only a conventional relation, and cannot possibly

¹ Poems, p. 66.

² Ibid, p. 67.

be known by poring over the spelling or sound of the words. The implication is profound. The convention must be learnt from a person aware of it and aware of the thing signified and able to point out the thing signified. The idea that the knowledge of the 'Self' can be learnt only from a Sage is typically Indian.¹ And, this is the lot of St. Margaret, and more so that of St. Thomas, the disciple of the divine inspirer, the Christ, who figures last in this chapter. The necessity of the inspirer is made clear by implication. The aspect of God presented now is one of transcendentalism, for it is now stated that God has no real connection with the World. This is indeed beyond the ken of the Seeker who therefore dismisses it as mere poetic fantasy, but asks the Sage to tell him something about the person 'who holds the store of good and bad'. The Sage directs him to a King upon 'the edge of place, the verge of things' though 'none ever found admittance at his gate', by revealing the roads that go to this king's house.

The fourth dialogue presents the Seeker on the edge of darkness. He asks: 'who is within this darkness'? The Voice from within claims, 'I am Thyself'. But the Seeker is warned off the premises with the peremptory command: "Adventure thou no further". The Voice Within takes full responsibility for Sin and admits: 'Sometimes he is my friend also'. In other words, the suffering that sin brings to man makes him think of his soul. That is why sin is sometimes His friend. The Seeker is left in bewilderment. The only positive statement vouchsafed is as follows:

"My shape and the dimensions it inhabits
Are nought thy senses take, nor yet thy main
Intelligence. Therefore my presence is
Shut to them, dark. Theirs is the jail, not mine."²

The Seeker is excited over his problem, and perplexed with the answers he gets. In the cryptic dialogue that follows between the Seeker and The Voice from within, the solution is given. It is difficult to take away Sin because of the mind-born position of evil which is peculiar to man. If one transcends the senses and mind, there is no good or bad. The Voice

¹ Kathopanishad, Chapter II, verse 9.

² *Poems*, pp. 71-2.

within speaks in paradoxes. She hates sin when it tempts man's soul to turn away from God. She likes it when it helps man to progress towards God through repentance and realisation, through suffering and awakening. The Voice within explains that she is the creator of mind and therefore admits that good and bad are her mongery. She alone controls them in the sense that so long as man is his own Ego, he has happiness or unhappiness, but when he is one with his own Soul, there are no notions of good and bad. To make one's own Soul, good and bad are the training ground. Thus the Interlude ends in a fitting way with the assertion of The Voice Within: "I am Thyself".

The Interlude is called "The Fool's Adventure". The poet thereby does not condemn the quest itself as foolish or despicable. The Seeker is a fool, but not in a derogatory sense. He is a fool in the sense that he is a simple man in the face of the magnitude of his problem. It is an adventure because he gets unexpected revelations, because he stumbles on one truth after another. The fool is also every man; if he has the patience he realises the quest – the three statuses of the divine (*Atman*, *Viswatman* and *Paramatman*, in Indian thought), represented by God the Son, God the Father and God the Holy Ghost on the three planes, the individual, the immanent and the transcendent.

The Fool's Adventure is one of the most difficult poems of Abercrombie. He raises here the question of 'Evil', its origin and explanation. When the 'Voice' says 'sin is sometimes my friend', perhaps she means that 'Evil' exists by God's permissive will. 'Sin' and 'Evil' are a furnace of fire to try men's souls. They lead man to God, if the erring man can understand His ways. This is the lesson taught in Augustine's *Confessions*. It is also the moral of the *Book of Job*. The title *The Fool's Adventure*, should not, however, mislead us. After all, the Seeker reaches the end of his quest successfully though he starts with scepticism. He discovers finally that his 'Self' is the *monger* of good and bad. This idea is worked out more vividly in the *Bhagavad-gita* where it is stated that *Kama* and *Krodha* are responsible for sin. The poem is perhaps entitled *The Fool's Adventure* because the Seeker is a 'Fool' who tries to place 'Sin' outside man and

man's mind and as something imposed on him from outside by the World or by God. He attempts to deny free will, but the 'Voice' reminds him : 'I am Thyself'.

There are many striking lines in the poem, and the exposition is wonderful, though a little laboured. This Interlude shows that Abercrombie is a monist. This is also the suggestion in his fuller version of *The Sale of Saint Thomas*.

iv. An Escape

The Seeker in "The Fool's Adventure" has discovered that the individual Self is the *monger* of good and bad. But he has not found out how to overcome it. Abercrombie now introduces another seeker, a poet this time, who is more intuitive and more disciplined than his predecessor. The Poet, Idwal by name, goes to the hills and lives there for one winter, giving himself up to meditation and self-discipline. He even transcends all notions of property. So he is not moved when he is informed by his parson friend that some rascally tramp has broken into his cottage and stripped it bare. When he meets Hazel (his love), he is equally unperturbed. He proclaims his detachment and announces his intention to leave her. He is also able to view life and death evenly :

"...there's no more fear
Of staying in the toil of life,
Or being in death's captivity."¹

After three month's stay in the hills during winter, he learns to go outside his mind and discover that the ministers of good and evil do not hate each other at all. They even enjoy a blithe fellowship among themselves when none is about. Their supposed quarrel is only a masquerade before men.

"When to the world, which is man's mind, they come,
They have a part to play ; it is only a part ;
Outside, they are one set,—and foolish talk
It is that says they hate each other there."²

Idwal has searched for good and bad in the outside world, which he equates with man's mind. He has found that what

¹ Ibid, p. 83.

² Ibid.

lies beyond is also mind. But it is unknown, while the former is what Abercrombie calls the "self-known mind".

"For round the knowledgeable mind, which is
The Sounding coloured manifold plenteous world;
Round this that is lit, much unlit region of mind
Investing lies, the dark unknown besieging
The self-known mind, the world : yet all is mind."¹

At first he discovers the existence of two competing forces within man. He says: 'I am not one being, but caged enmity.' There are two kinds of forces which fight unceasingly, 'the desire of infinite things and the desire of finite'. Of these two, one of them, he says, has been in Eternity but is now trapped in the mind. But when and how it is trapped is not known. Being penned, it finds a companion inside the tray, namely, the desire of finite things, and engages in a constant fight with it. It longs for the Infinite and its companion longs for the finite. The wrestling between the two constitutes the life of man. This part of the Interlude has much universal validity. Yeats calls these two forces at work as *Self* and *Anti-Self*. We may call them *Soul* and *Ego*. If finite longing has the advantage of the fight without the entire force being consumed in it, it gives rise to painters and singers. Idwal has been one like that for some time. But now, after his sojourn among the hills, his longing for the infinite is strengthened and he feels that he has received messages in sleep. He thinks that he is chosen for the message because the 'brawl' has been finished inside him and because he has killed the desire for the finite. Idwal now feels that this messenger from 'the other where' is waiting to leave his message a third time, and therefore plans to follow the messenger on the third visit and go out of the trap and escape. He thinks that with just a little sleep he will be free! But, the fact is that without his knowledge the desire for the Finite or the Ego is inactive only for the time being. It is not yet killed. With the desire for the Infinite predominating, Idwal speculates that 'the nooser of souls, the many-rumoured, the shifty-named' is the same as Death. He equates Infinity with Death. Yet he wonders 'who the man they call Death is, and how he uses souls he nets'. This line of speculation offers.

¹ Ibid, pp. 76-7.

a parallel to the Eastern doctrine of *Pasa* (noose), *Pasu* (the soul held by the noose), *Pasupati* (the holder of the noose i.e., the Lord), *Yoga* (the process of release) and *Moksha* (the condition of release). But Idwal's conclusion that the 'nooser' might be death or some other who is not likely to be well-disposed to man, is certainly different from it.

"Not like, that he who goes so noiselessly

And can make snares so well, hath good intent."¹

Idwal is not able to tread the regions beyond, surrounding the self-known mind, the world. He feels that even if he escapes from the prison of the mind, he has to go forth into darkness. His concentration on the limited domain of his mental consciousness exactly represents the Earth's hold on him and it is from this that he tries to escape. This is an inherent contradiction. It is therefore represented by the duality of the desires in man. One seeks the Infinite in the unknown darkness and the other concentrates on the limited mental horizon. The one longing for the Infinite; the other hankers after the Finite.

The interlude opens in this setting and, throughout the poem, Idwal speaks under the influence of either of the two desires, the Finite and the Infinite. The desire for the Infinite gains mastery when Idwal speaks to the Parson and Hazel. Towards the end the desire for the Finite is prominent again. When he gains a momentary victory over finite desires, he mistakes it for full conquest and hopes to achieve deliverance through sleep. Yet he hangs back from sleep and delays his 'delivering'. In the beginning he thinks that it is his longing for the Infinite that is active. But towards the end it is shown that it is the longing for the Finite, in mortal dread of encounter with the ally, that prevents sleep. Finally, he prepares to go to sleep and escape because he can no longer resist it after three days of vigil. He says :

"The sleep-hunger dims my aching brain

I have no strength against it."²

He understands that the line of his progress is towards sleep and he thinks that he has to sleep a little in order to be free. The Parson says that Idwal is wrong in coming to the hills and that

¹ Ibid, p.76.

² Ibid, p.78.

the bare dead hills cannot teach him anything about life. He further says that man must find wisdom among men. He points out that "that strange distaste for being is all wrong and gravely wrong." But Idwal silences him through his new illumination, and says that good and bad are the same. The Parson leaves him to be handled by Hazel, his former love. She thinks he is ill and offers to nurse him, but in vain. She addresses him in language which shows exactly why the whole line of progress planned by Idwal is doomed to failure. He wants to be saved from consciousness which, according to him, is 'the disease'. By consciousness he means 'earth's hold on him', as revealed in the following lines :

"Release like fire, cheating the earth's hold,
Blessedly saving me from consciousness."¹

It is clear that Idwal means by 'consciousness', consciousness of the external universe which is necessarily a divided impression conveyed through the five senses, the evidence of each of the senses being incommensurable with that of the others. It is from this consciousness that Idwal wishes to escape and he selects slumber or unconsciousness, which finally culminates in his death, as his means of escape. The Parson wonders what he dies of. A doubt naturally arises whether Idwal dies an emancipated man or a mere *simpliciter*. Hazel symbolises the world or the desire for the Finite. The Parson represents commonsense or worldly wisdom. He is the philosopher of the *Ego*. Hills and stars symbolise the Infinite and the conflict is presented in all its seriousness. Idwal does not fight out the encounter, but only escapes from it. The whole poem sounds like a caricature of Shelley who has advocated a similar philosophy :

"...Die,

If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!"²

As the conflict remains unresolved we have to think that Idwal fails in the inner struggle. He fails in his attempt to control his desire for the Finite in the waking state, and he tries to escape from it as it lies dormant, i.e., in the sleeping state. Moreover he has no clear notions of Self and is unable to differentiate himself from the two desires.

¹ Poems, p.86.

² Adonais.

"I know not what those words mean. I say,
 Desire of infinite things, desire of finite.
 But what you call your soul is more than half
 The finite longing, and the infinite
 Is all a cripple and a starveling in you.
 But still, though maimed, it keeps the struggle up,
 For 'tis the wrestle of the twain makes man."¹

The desire for the Infinite gains strength when he lives on the hills and overcomes the desire for the Finite. Since the Infinite is caged in the human mind, he wants to escape from 'the bondage of the beauty of earth'. It cannot make him prisoner if he takes no cognisance of it. So he holds that consciousness is 'the disease', which can be cured only through sleep. Thus he 'would escape from life'. However, unable to gain mastery over the earth by increased consciousness, he tries to effect an escape, and the interlude is properly called "An Escape", the escape of a poet whose achievements and drawbacks are pronounced to be (in the words of the Parson) mere fancies.

We do not know definitely if Abercrombie has criticised any poet or any school of poetry in the character of Idwal. "It is not good for a man to be alone". But each man must deal with his own problem. According to the Parson, Idwal's problem is an unreal one. To Hazel it must have seemed that Idwal is rejecting the solution to the problem (by rejecting her). The reader's problem is to detect Abercrombie's solution in the poem. It is to be found in the title itself. The seeker has only evaded the problem and not faced it.

v. Peregrinus

Peregrinus, according to tradition, was a wicked pagan philosopher. He performed many vicious and lustful deeds and gained notoriety. His dear desires and lusts were a 'mutiny'. They grew too strong for him. So he wanted to destroy them through 'Self-worship', a doctrine that his intellect had discovered. Abercrombie is not much worried about the disputed antecedents of Peregrinus.² He concentrates his attention upon

¹ Poems, pp.80-1.

² Rev. W.L. Collins (Tr.)—Lucian, pp. 174-8.

the spectacular act of Self-worship. Peregrinus's great act of burning himself publicly makes Abercrombie attribute a high spiritual motive to him. Peregrinus takes his stand on the aesthetic instinct in man and says that love is impossible for any object if man does not see beauty in it. Man comes to regard evil as an ugly thing and good as a beautiful one. Sins are ugly things and they are to be shunned. But if man learns to see good things he can love them. To see good is in itself a beautiful act of perception. Therefore, says Peregrinus, 'be beautiful and love yourselves', for one can love the Self only when it is beautiful. In order that the Self may be more lovable, it must be made more beautiful. This process of beautifying the Self, therefore, means, a regular attempt to avoid all sins scrupulously. This doctrine naturally leads Peregrinus to Self-worship. Peregrinus thinks that the elimination of sin is facilitated through Self-worship. He wants to give up his life and thus show the consummation of the principle of Self-worship. He desires to die by burning himself publicly so that people might be converted to the new doctrine of Self-worship. Of course, he does not desire that others should imitate him in this act of self-immolation which holds good only in his particular case. His teaching may be briefly summarised almost in his own language thus: "The world and all the beings in it are like a multitude of waves upon a sea. In the sea the whirl into which the watery substance of flows and currents is seized exists separately. So is the 'kind of man' in the world. It is like a scattered pool of quicksilver whose drops have a tendency to be one again, but if one drop gets into contact with some dirt, the skin it now forms on itself keeps it away from the rest. So also man's nature, moving in the world, has acquired a dirt of strange desires. It therefore keeps itself unmixed with the one undifferentiated substance, namely the Self. The one Truth in all the world is the Self. One should therefore see that one's body and mind are rendered fit for the dwelling of the Self. It does not mean that one should try at once to mend the world. One should rather try to mend oneself first. The 'kind of a man' will be a holy kind, by the act of Self-worship. One need not die to achieve it. One must learn to be the priest of one's own Self, "lighting clean fires of

worship with every faculty of flesh and soul". Of course this is very difficult to achieve. But to achieve it means to reach the very summit of consciousness.

Now Peregrinus must die because his greatest wrong (the desecration of his Self in his past dissolute life) demands the greatest act of worship. This is a burning type of apotheosis, an extreme instance of love to Self. When Christians accept that "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for friend"¹ should they not approve one's sacrifice of one's own life for one's own Self? This seems to be a plausible position. Another ambition of Peregrinus is to give a message, "which will make more joy and beauty on the earth, than all the hopes of Heaven and fears of God", by burning himself. This he has to do, and no other, for he alone knows full well that he cannot give "clean priestly service" to his Self in any other way. So he climbs up the ladder and prepares himself for the great act. He feels that he is in the possession of a message which is greater than Christianity :

"I write a message which, if men will read
And follow in the way I link them on,
Will make more joy and beauty in the earth
Than all the hopes of Heaven and fears of God".²

Then he draws pointed attention to the two most important teachings of Christ about loving God, and loving one's neighbours and condemns both. Christ says that there are only two commandments to follow : "The first of all the commandments is, Hear O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord; And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind and with all thy strength". And the second is this, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these".³ Peregrinus dismisses both these commandments in the following words :

"...Ye love unthriftilly
God and your neighbour; call in your rambling love,
Ye need it all yourselves to shore your wills

¹ St. John—1513.

² *Poems*, p. 92.

³ St. Mark—1229-31.

From resting on the soft uncleanly sin".¹

He says that one should learn to love one's own Self and improve it by resisting sin with one's own will. He hopes to be able to propound a new faith, spreading it "farther abroad than Galilee and Olivet have gone about the mouths of nations." Marcon says :

"He holds he hath a better tongue than Christ
To make men leave the dirt and stand upright."²

Marcon is a Christian and he cannot accept any teaching which is a rival to that of the Christian Church. He is nervous that Peregrinus may persuade others to accept his views. To prevent others from approaching Peregrinus, he pretends to be his friend and becomes his disciple and promises to spread his doctrine, hoping that the pagan philosopher will die without any interpreter, save himself. In this manner Marcon wants to serve Christ, and no doubt hopes to be appreciated on the Judgement Day for his services in stifling a dangerous rival. He thinks that it is exactly in respect of such rival teachers that Christ has warned : "Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits...A corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit".³ Accordingly he hopes that he will be excused by the Christ for duplicity towards Peregrinus. 'God gave me cunning', he says, and with it he proposes to prevent Peregrinus from achieving his aim. With this falsehood Marcon proposes to serve God. Though it is personally hateful to him, he believes that it is profitable, since it will be serviceable to God :

"A hateful thing is friendship false ; yet good
And profitable may it be if God
Bends, as he can, the crooked ill to straight.
I was a friend to Peregrinus, — friend
In seeming ; with the falsehood I serve God."⁴

Peregrinus prepares to burn himself and hopes this shall be the most famous of all his deeds. His ambition is to overcome

¹ Poems, p.99.

² Poems, p.93.

³ St. Matthew-715-17.

⁴ Poems, p. 93.

the notoriety of his wicked past and be remembered by upright men. Though he has this for his motive to start with, he has not yet conquered his desires. He is sorry that he is destroying his desires. But he feels that there is no other way since they are very strong and have complete sway over him. He says in his soliloquy :

“Yet I grieve over my dear desires and lusts
That have to be so cruelly destroyed.
But there's no help ; they are a mutiny,
They grow too strong and would be masters in me.
I'll not have that. I'll ruin them with the flame
Rather than drive a team I cannot steer”.¹

That is why it is not surprising for us to find that he shrinks, towards the end, from the act of sacrifice. He wants to avoid the proposed self-immolation, but is prevented from doing so. However, he gets braced up and carries out his intention. He thinks :

“Why, it is as it should be now?
For now privately I shall do my worship
And have my own approval, no starded applause,
Far better rite. To my own holiness,
To my Self is all my being sacrificed :
I am the Champion against my own wrong.”²

He dies without any further complaint and utters no further speech. We are left free to infer that, at least, he has brought himself to accept the point of view which he has preached all along and that he dies as a true believer in his own doctrine. Lucian's version suggests that Peregrinus was a consummate impostor both in life and death, vainly seeking to escape the obloquy of a sinful life, and possibly forced to carry out his announcement in the end, against his will.³ But Abercrombie puts meaningful words into the mouth of Peregrinus and tells us that, whatever his past, he is not an impostor, but a true believer in his own doctrine at least towards the end. Prof. Oliver Elton rightly points out :

“Abercrombie's Peregrinus has repented of the lusts and

¹ Ibid, p. 92.

² Ibid, p. 102.

³ Rev. W.L. Collins (Tr.)—Lucian, pp. 174-8.

passions which had degraded his real Self. For his Self, and not Jove or Christ, is 'the sacred thing'; and by the fire it will be wholly cleansed, and he will have borne his witness to the world. As in Lucian's tale, he falters at the last and begs to be let off; but the chorus insist, and then (not as in Lucian) he plucks up heart and cries 'yare with thy fires' content with self-approval since the world will not listen.¹

The part of Marcon is a luminous commentary on the sophism that the end justifies the means. He seems to have evolved his sophistry from the teaching of Christ that his disciples should love their enemies and beware of false prophets. Marcon cannot love Peregrinus as his brother, as the son of His own 'Father which is in Heaven'. He assumes that his prime concern is with the false prophet, Peregrinus. He considers every means justifiable for defeating the ambition of Peregrinus. He thus violates all the principal commandments of Christ in achieving his aim. The irony of it is that he believes that he will find favour in the eyes of God! Marcon himself is somewhat troubled in his own conscience, and that is why he offers a devout prayer to the Virgin Mary to bear him in mind on the day of judgment.

It is a mockery to pray to the Father of all to take delight in the death of one of His children. This prayer grates harshly and jarringly on one's sensibility as going against the very spirit of a religion which teaches: "If ye forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you; But if ye forgive not men their trespasses neither will your Father forgive your trespasses",² and "That ye resist not evil".³ In following the warning against false prophets, Marcon has ceased to be a Christian and has, in spite of his prayer, suffered a moral defeat, even as Peregrinus has scored a moral success. And this is borne out when, towards the end, the Corinthian Chorus addresses the dying Peregrinus, "Better is it to die as thou hast done than to live unknown". Marcon, fearing that the pagan philosopher's death is making a mark, calls them murderers. They ridicule him for his part in the whole affair.

¹ Proceedings of the British Academy, 1939, p. 400.

² St. Matthew—614-15.

³ Ibid, 539.

He tries to justify himself on the ground that the thoughts of Peregrinus have spoiled God's pleasure in the fragrant prayers of saints, and is therefore asked by the Chorus, "And how did his burning flesh smell to thy God?—Agreeably to His nose?" The Chorus then goes on to speculate that just as in ancient times the gods were reported to have immolated themselves to obtain immortality, it might be that Peregrinus had had a similar intention. And that Peregrinus might have been 'the dying god' must have sounded to Marcon as the utter shattering of all his purpose!

Now, we are in a position to assess the value of the achievement of the pagan philosopher. We know that till the last moment, he has not subdued his desires, since he craves after fame and reluctantly climbs up the ladder. When he is not appreciated, he wants to climb down the pyre and save his life. Only when he is not allowed to come down, he gets braced up. It is not certain that his Self has been rendered completely pure even during his last moments and that he has obtained salvation by self-immolation, though the doctrine sounds plausible. The chorus consisting of the Corinthian youths who are only sadists, mocks at the martyr-egoist thus:

"Now never was there in the world a game
So merry as this ravishing
Death of Peregrinus."¹

We have seen how the Self-worship of Peregrinus has been built on the vacuous foundations of vice and how it has led the pagan philosopher to egoism and pride. An ardent love for Self leads to a sort of pride, and that is why Peregrinus assumed the role of a prophet, thinking that he is far superior even to the Christ. This pride and selfishness cannot absolve him of his own sins or desires of the finite, though he boasts himself to be a Messiah to remove the sins of others. Since he cannot himself face the mutiny of his desires, he vainly tries to burn them out, but burning of the physical body does not in the least imply destruction of the mental desires and thus he exposes the futility of his proud prophetic zeal for removing the sins of others. Peregrinus chooses the way of death, the way of Christ in the act of crucifixion. His new theory of Self-

¹ *Poems*, p. 107.

worship is, no doubt, plausible. But, Abercrombie's purpose is to show the difference between the true prophet and the false one. Jesus Christ is a true prophet, not by his doctrines or philosophy but on account of true saintliness in life and conquest of ego. The crucifixion is not of his own choice. If Christianity has triumphed it is not because of a concocted doctrine. It is because Christ has lived his life and passed on to his disciples what he practised. He is a perfect master of himself and so he offers to be crucified for speaking the truth. It is not the case with Peregrinus. The burning itself on the part of the pagan philosopher is the most ambitious desire, but in Christ there is disinterested living. Abercrombie does not emphasize the idea of the false prophet. In the case of Peregrinus, it is not Self-worship but Ego-worship in actual living. His doctrine sounds all right in theory. The crowd, as is always the case, cannot discern between a real saint and a faked one. Marcon's views are coloured by his devout following or by what he has inherited or adopted. But, the reader's views should be clear on this point, as he cannot miss the implicit irony which is really wonderful on the part of the poet, as Peregrinus shows signs of cowardice and not control over himself in the end.

vi. The Sale of Saint Thomas

Abercrombie reaches the highest pinnacle of his philosophy in "The Sale of Saint Thomas" (1931). The hero of the play is the proverbial doubting Thomas, one of the apostles of Christ, entrusted with preaching the gospel to India. The first act of play was written in 1911 but Abercrombie took nearly twenty years to finish the last five acts. It is here that he propounds the doctrine of the "Palace of Souls". Though there are certain passages which seem to throw doubt as to whether Abercrombie has had a mere vision of the "Palace of Souls" or whether he has lived for any considerable time as an inmate of the Palace, it is certain that it represents the high-water mark of his philosophic achievement. And his message in the domain of metaphysics is to be found, if at all, here alone.

Saint Thomas is one of the elect of the Christian Church. He has had direct contact with Jesus the Christ. He has been

his disciple, received the Sermon on the Mount direct from Him, followed Him till the Crucifixion, and has gone forth to India as an apostolic father. He is one of the twelve holy apostles, and is considered worthy of being sent to India to carry the message of the Son of God. The *Sale of Thomas* is part of a legend which appears for the first time in the Syrian Texts of the Acts of Saint Thomas, and which Abercrombie himself very succinctly summarises in the prefatory note to his play. But Abercrombie's interest is in the poetic presentation of the psychological and spiritual development in Thomas as well as the apostle's mission to India. The play deals with Thomas's hesitations, journey, illumination, service, and finally the gospel he preached in India.

We know from the Bible that Jesus sent forth his twelve apostles including Thomas to preach that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.¹ He authorised them to heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead and cast out devils. He enjoined them to give freely what they had received. They were assured that they need not provide themselves for their journeys. If they should be brought up before governors and kings in foreign lands they were directed thus: "Take no thought how or what you shall speak, for it shall be given to you in the same hour what ye shall speak; for it is not ye shall speak but the spirit of your Father which speaketh in you." Abercrombie presents Thomas when he is about to take ship for India. The apostle becomes nervous and thinks :

"But why the Indian lot to me? Why mine
Such fearful gospelling? For the Lord knew
What a frail soul he gave me, and a heart
Lame and unlikely for the large events."²

Though he wonders whether he is taking a risk in entrusting himself and his divine message to the 'puny boat' before him, yet he is fortified in a moment and feels that he is safe :

"Ay, this huge sin of nature, the salt sea,
Shall be afraid of me, and of the mind
Within me, that with gesture, speech and eyes
Of the Messiah flames."³

¹ St. Matthew—10

² *Poems*, p. 111.

³ *Ibid*, p. 113.

He also comes to the conclusion :

“The malice of the sea will slink from me,
And the wind be harmless as a muzzled wolf;
For I am a torch, and the flame of me is God.”¹

Abbanes, the captain of the ship is in need of a carpenter for his Indian king to build him a “Palace of Souls”. When Thomas goes to take ship for India, the captain warns him saying that the land is infested with flies and that the kings in India are in the habit of torturing merchants and foreign priests of different religions. On hearing this, Thomas moves from faith to vacillation, from vacillation to prudence, and again from prudence to faith. The dangers involved in a venture upon the sea to an unknown land, the harrowing and malicious description of India by the captain as a ‘fly-plagued land’ with uncivil ‘queer and moody men and kings’ and the seeming folly of the lot falling to him alone (and not a band of them) to preach to ‘that tanned mankind of India’—all challenge his faith. He becomes a victim to prudence. He considers it unsafe to voyage on the uncertain waters and to undertake single-handed such a super-human task. He therefore decides that he is unequal to the task, when Christ appears as a Stranger on the quay, and sells him to the captain, commending Thomas as the proper carpenter the king in India needs. He also points out to Thomas that his sin is ‘prudence’, a policy of seeking sure safety in the present in preference to the risky enterprise of reaching the ends of created purpose. What is required in him is rather a combination of faith and ecstatic action as opposed to prudence and a willingness to send forth desire to scan the regions outside his knowledgeable Self. Christ gives this message to Thomas in a noble passage that certainly leaps out of its context and takes a place of its own in the readers’ minds on account of its dignity and perfection of substance and style :

“Knowing the possible, see thou try beyond it
Into impossible things, unlikely ends;
And thou shalt find thy knowledgeable desire
Grow large as all the regions of thy soul,
Whose firmament doth cover the whole of Being,
And of created purpose reach the ends.”²

¹ Ibid, p. 113.

² Ibid, p. 126.

A review of the First Act of this play points out: "The doubts and fears are such as might torment a man of the character of Thomas in any age ; and they are expressed so well that they reveal his character and make us sympathize with him. He is a real man setting out upon a real and desperate enterprise ; and we read on to see what will be the issue of the struggle in his mind, not to enjoy the pretty phrases of the poem."¹

Thus, the historical legend,² is endowed in the hands of Abercrombie with unique significance. Abercrombie offers a contrast to other poets in this respect. Their themes may be the skein of life, with all its intricacies and complications, but Abercrombie's purpose in his Interludes and this play, is not only to present life but also read its meaning and deeper significance. It is not the beauty of the episode that fascinates him, it is not even the opportunity to interpret the prudence of Thomas, which the latter is yet to overcome, but essentially the beauty and significance of the gospel itself taught in the end. That is why a student of Abercrombie might feel that the vacillation in Thomas is rather too strongly presented considering its place in the entire theme.

The journey of St. Thomas, along with the captain Abbanes, (whom historians call Habban³) in the midnight, on the midsea, is of great importance. 'Into this colourless magic' of the midnight hour, Thomas comes out to see the captain enjoying the sight of rats that broke loose, on the deck. These rats are certainly a more pleasant set with their 'small round eyes' looking like 'glinting little jewels' than the terrible ones described by Browning in "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" or Southey in "Bishop Hatto." Abercrombie describes :

"And in the stillness of their clustering
Along the yards and up the lines of rigging,
Their lively bodies vanished into shadow.
But where the half-light in a sparkle caught
The keen suspicion of their small round eyes,
It filled the height of gear about the mast

¹ The Times Literary Supplement, p.332, September, 14, 1911.

² V. A. Smith - Early History of India, pp. 245-50.

³ Ibid, p. 246.

With glinting little jewels, green and red ;
Like a tall tree in fairyland, that bears
Amid grey twilight of the forest there,
In breathless secrecy of spectral leaves,
Berries of emerald and carbuncle.”¹

Thomas tries to take meaning from the captain's attempt to be more than himself by 'bringing out the shameless vermin in a gambolling dance' and taking pleasure in their joy. He takes the clue from the captain and decides to be 'more than himself' and insinuate its meaning into his own affairs—his mission to India.

“More than myself I must be ? More than myself ?
Ay, till the kingdom of heaven is within me,
And the King in his kingdom is one with me !
For by how much I can be more than myself,
By so much am I more myself than ever ;
And this can reach perfection :”²

The whole night of the journey he spends in introspection may, in communion with stars, and realises the real beauty :

“what was that but joy
Their being knew translated into his ?”³

The moment he learns to participate in the joys of others and identify them with his own, “must not the joy his being knew be theirs ?” Thomas realises this state of interdependence in life which is conditioned by what each gives to each.

The stay of St. Thomas in the slave-shed, after the journey in the ship, marks the dawn of real enlightenment in the apostle. In the slave-shed, it may be said, he has been kept as in purgatory, and he patiently suffers from many cruel sights and grievous dreams. He is indignant that the Hebrew girl, among the slaves, should be assaulted, but he learns later that anger and cursing are unworthy of him. Besides, he learns to avoid the danger 'that waits on words' after his more terrible dreams, the vision of a naked man, 'a spectre of gaunt black nature' and the vision of the ghastly corpse of a man whom he curses to be the carrion of scavenging dogs. Then

¹ *The Sale of Saint Thomas (in Six Acts)*, p. 40.

² *Ibid*, p.47.

³ *Ibid*.

“His senses reeled, and darken'd to a dream
Of every kind of life out of himself
Issuing.”¹

He suddenly perceives

“what stone it was
That made such radiant masonry : all that wonder
Of intricate towering fabric wrought in light
Was living structure—infinite shining lives
United in one shining symmetry :

Which was himself! Himself the palace now!”²

And this ‘Unity of Souls’ he wants to preach to the Indian King, Gundaphorus (or Vindaparna as the Indian historians call him), who desired a Palace of Souls built for him in accordance with his dream. On the advice of his brother Gad, the king tests Thomas by asking him why he desired The Palace of Souls to be built. Thomas answers in the most philosophical strain in a magnificent passage, and it forms the peak of all the metaphysical speculations of Abercrombie. According to the apostle, every act of man is a product of the past and a foundation for the future. Just as different sounds of different instruments result ‘in fugue concerting one everlasting music’, so also the human acts add “to the world’s almighty will”. The act enriches itself by creating new ones which in turn become creative and yet shall be one. This applies not merely to ‘mechanic particles’ but also to souls, ‘Atoms of self-will’d energy fusing their courses’, but each at every moment ‘narrowing itself to the deliberate act of conscious spirit’. Since man is the most consummate product of the divine Will, he must be ‘more than himself’ by creating beauty, by ecstatic action, by removing from the world, misery, frustration, injustice, idiocy, hunger and disease. So Thomas asks the king if the created purpose of man is not to be careful

“that our deeds
Immortalise that which we most can love?
That which within us we can feel belongs
To a world of mountains made, and magnificent sea
And lovely grass and clouds and stars and morning;

¹ Ibid, p. 59

² Ibid, p. 62.

And not to a world of misery and frustration,
Injustice, idiocy, hunger and disease?"¹

In other words, man should try to increase beauty till the very existence becomes Life's beloved Paradise. This 'Palace of Souls', say Thomas, lives eternally quite in contrast with the ordinary palaces which men admire only for a few centuries.

This answer satisfies the king who purchases him as a slave and entrusts him with the work. Now begins the service of Thomas. He prepares himself to serve the world. Thomas spends all the money of Gundaphorus in charities, in feeding the famishing people there. And he thinks he is building a 'Palace of Souls' for the king. He explains to his captain friend, who is now a surety to him, thus:

"To serve these people is to be myself
And to transcend myself."²

Thomas is not afraid of the consequences of his ecstatic action. He is strong in faith and intent on executing the divine purpose:

"But let come
What will to me: the kingdom of heaven will come,
Whether my work or not: God sees to that.
Mine is to do whatever needs my hand,
And look no further."³

This finally leads to the real gospelling of Thomas. The Indian king comes to know of this seeming extravagance and faithlessness of his slave, and also gets infuriated on account of the death of his brother, in consequence of the shock produced by the loss of the money entrusted to the slave. Then he makes up his mind to punish Abbanes and Thomas. The apostle admits before the king that he has spent the money on beggars because they have been famishing, and he is not worried with the notions of his loyalty or disloyalty to the king in the action. Even when the king threatens him with death, he answers that he is not afraid of facing death, for he loves the spirit of life which he enters when he dies. The king is inspired with implicit faith in his preachings, as also by the miraculous rising of

¹ Ibid, p. 74.

² Ibid, p. 91.

³ Ibid, p. 92.

his dead brother who requests that the 'Palace of Souls' that Thomas has built, be given to him. The story concludes with Thomas's preaching to the king:

"Enter me, and find it!

Your palace is in me; for now in me

Life is the kingdom of heaven. Become my life,

And be the lord of the palace I have built,"¹

and the king's acceptance of the new gospel. St. Thomas is now able to account for his hesitation at the time of embarking for India. Teeming India at first loomed on him overwhelmingly in mere detestable confusion. Yet it was only the horror of the darkness in his soul, looking forth and finding its horrible answer in the world. And when he gave himself to serve the world and love the horror of it, his mind was quickened into shining power that brought about the supreme change in him.

"And, as if music crystallized in fire,

The world became a palace for my soul.

And then the miracle! I loved myself!

Ay, for I lived in beauty which to know

Is to become:"²

Therefore Thomas explains to the king what it is to be living in the world:

"...spirit which lives

Divining everywhere perceiving spirit,

The answer to itself; which as it knows

Itself experience the whole world gives,

Knows that itself is to the whole world given."³

Thus Thomas converts Gundaphorus to his faith and adds:

"...his word shall be your mind,

Your will shall be the meaning of his word.

And you shall find that when you love the world

As he requires of you, you have your palace."⁴

When will his word, i.e., the teaching of Jesus, be the mind of the King? It is possible only when the latter also is capable of thinking in accordance with the preachings of Christ. The

¹ Ibid, p. 118.

² Ibid, p. 122.

³ Ibid, p. 119.

⁴ Ibid, p. 122.

king should accordingly tune up his knowledge, logic and wisdom; then only his will shall become the meaning of the word. Thus faith, ecstatic action, and experience of the oneness of all souls, are the successive stages in the spiritual development of the apostle Thomas who has now learnt the supreme kind of self-love in a spirit of service. Thomas has already explained it to Abbanes thus:

“...and if he love the service,
Must it not be the servant he will love
Himself at last?”¹

Thus the idea of self-love is given here the richest meaning possible and without any taint of vanity or egotism. What a contrast to Peregrinus! Thomas continues his doctrine of ‘the palace of souls’ or ‘the universe of lives’;

“Where each in all and all in each must live;
And loves to give the best exchange he can
For what he takes; and finds, the more he gives,
The lovelier grows the world his life receives.”²

While to a Christian, the idea of the ‘Palace of Souls’ is an illustration of the Biblical thought: “I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one”,³ to a Hindu it shows some resemblance to *Advaita*. Perhaps Abercrombie is to some extent influenced by Empedokles’s theory of “Life Perfectible through Love”.⁴

Abercrombie has thus built a philosophy of his own in his highly metaphysical “Interludes” and “The Sale of Saint Thomas”, and it is by no means far-fetched to equate the speakers in these poems with the voices of the poet’s inner questionings. He presents a picture of Life that offers a solution to its problems and articulates a message to the world. In “Blind”, he warns that one should not be blind and crazy, believing in spiritual fatalism, but should rather try to control emotions like love and anger. In the “Fool’s Adventure”, he points out that the emotions proceed directly from the Ego who is the *monger* of good and bad. In “An Escape,” he shows

¹ Ibid, p. 92.

² Ibid, p. 119.

³ St. John-1723.

⁴ Romanticism, pp.89-91.

that the Self is swayed by the duality of the flesh and the spirit, constantly warring, one for the finite, and the other for the infinite, the former of which constituting by far the larger part. That the Self is really different from the desires and should be kept pure from them, is taught in the doctrine of 'Self-worship' preached by Peregrinus though he could not practise it. The message of "The New God: A Miracle" is that devotion or constant prayer to God together with complete self-surrender is a sure path for salvation. This devotion culminates in Saint Thomas's building up of a Palace of Souls which enjoins a worship of all, the Lord Immanent in all.

This is Abercrombie's ingenious contribution to Philosophy.

Chapter V

Emblems of Love

Love, in a single cloud of radiant dust,
Love, from this earth's austerity or lust,
Love, from the place of shades doleful and dim,
Love is arisen, and we are risen with him.

—C. Williams

Love is both spiritual and sensual. Plato and his followers considered love purely from the spiritual point of view, as having nothing to do with the body or the senses. Abercrombie takes up this interesting phenomenon of love—the passion of men and women—from its origin in primitive society and traces its growth through all its evolutionary phases and concludes with the picture of a perfect type of love. “Emblems of Love” is designed in several dialogues, on account of the range of its matter and the necessity to organise it in several stages; but the underlying idea of love’s slow evolution from primitive desire to spiritual perfection gives the sequence what Abercrombie would call “some consistent shapeliness or coherent unity of final impression.”¹ That is why the author intends “Emblems of Love” to be taken as a single poem. It is indeed Abercrombie’s greatest achievement, being “large in conception and dignified in execution, and is set forth in a series of stories of sex-relationships dramatically presented.”² It was first published in 1912 by John Lane, and to procure a copy of it, was then a difficult matter. Lord Esher has learnt from the publishers that “the first copies were in slightly lighter material than the later ones and that the design on the front cover was stamped in gold whilst in later copies it was not”.

¹ Abercrombie—The Idea of Great Poetry, p. 147.

² Marguerite Wilkinson—New Voices, p. 415.

John Gawsworth, a compiler of the first editions of books has examined several copies of "Emblems of Love" including an advance copy given by Abercrombie to his wife during December 1911, and in all cases he has seen what is considered to be the first issue, with cover design in gold.¹

In some of Abercrombie's plays and poems, he raises or seems to raise certain problems, and gives the reader an impression of groping in the dark for their solutions. But in this wonderful poem, the poet assumes throughout an air of triumph, an attitude of signal achievement which he explicitly claims, in the *Epilogue*:

"But we have raised it up again!
A loftier palace, fairer far,
Is ours, and one that fears no war."²

In this poem, Abercrombie marks three distinct stages in the history of the concept of love. Therefore the poem is divided into three broad sections—"Discovery and prophecy", "Imperfection" and "Virginity and Perfection". The aim of the author is to prophesy the wonder of love; and he succeeds in his attempt. In the prelude to the first section, he envisages the primitive state of society in which woman was viewed as an object of joy and excitement, and with sacred feelings as 'a mother of her tribe's increase'. In the next stage woman has become for man not merely an instrument of pleasure but also a thing of rare beauty and an object of aesthetic delight. This is a purely one-sided relationship, and so the woman naturally rebels. She feels that she has also a right to enjoy herself. She cannot be merely a tool of enjoyment. Yet she does not know how to assert herself; she merely rebels against the existing order of things and denies life. This negation of life and love is certainly a step leading to a more assertive type of love in which woman exercises her free will to enjoyment. Her role now ceases to be passive. She is active and extravagant. But this aggressive type woman's love is imperfect, for it lacks virginity of spirit. The poet presents this imperfect attitude in three typical instances. In the first, a woman falls in love "at first sight" with a Jacobite rebel of 1745 whose dead body is exposed at the

¹ John Gawsworth—Ten Contemporaries, p. 24.

² Poems, p. 272.

Scottish gate; in the second a woman experiments with the love of living persons only to wonder at their ways and despise them; and in the last the woman loves a more civilized type of man, and both the lover and the love are dragged into debasement by 'love's tyranny'. This last variety, though a considerable improvement over the previous ones, is also imperfect as it lacks spontaneity and complete self-surrender.

In the third section, Abercrombie represents woman as realising the need for virginity as an essential constituent of her being and of true love. He uses the word 'virginity' in a most comprehensive sense. It is not mere physical virginity or chastity. It is also uprightness of spirit, firm and unbending to the demands of the world. He cites the example of Judith, a widow of Bethulia, who had an ardent love for her husband. She suddenly reconciles herself to the idea of luring the Assyrian General to death when her country is besieged and is in danger, and thus she sacrifices her uprightness of spirit or spiritual virginity. This stage leads up to the "Eternal Wedding" which embodies the poet's conception of perfect love, "in which the dual powers of the sexual and spiritual are fused in harmony with the basic principle of life".¹ There shall then be a transcendental union of those powers expressing themselves in a single ecstasy.

To understand the whole theme of this magnificent work of art, a close study of each of the three sections as parts of a single poem, is absolutely necessary. In the words of Miss M.C. Sturgeon, "while single poems from it (*Emblems of Love*) will disclose high individual value, both as art and philosophy, their whole effect and meaning can only be completely seized by reading them as a sequence, and in the light of the conception to which they all contribute".² To quote Abercrombie himself, the sense of the greatness of (great) poetry can hardly be so decisive as when our minds are, without interruption, dominated by a single form of one poem.³ He continues that a similar, if not equal effect, may be produced by a series of poems where some connexion of theme, in idea or mood, some

¹ Priscilla Thouless - *Modern Poetic Drama*, p. 66.

² Mary C. Sturgeon - *Studies of Contemporary poets*, p. 29.

³ Abercrombie - *The Idea of Great Poetry*, p. 72.

relatedness in the kind of harmony effected over things, enables our minds to fuse the several impressions into one conclusive impression.¹ To achieve this one final impression, Abercrombie collects his whole sense of one aspect of life, namely, his idea of love, into the behaviour and spirit of certain memorable personalities like Vashti and Judith.

ii. Discovery and Prophecy

The first section of the series of poems that constitute "Emblems of Love" is 'Discovery and Prophecy'. As the name suggests this section is significant for two things, discovery and prophecy. The prelude is to be taken simply as a prefatory episode which deals with the wonder or excitement that has gradually developed into the sex instinct of men for women. The discovery here is the sudden consciousness of an inexplicable delight in the primitive wolf-hunter at the sight of woman. She is, of course, an object of fear to men like Cast. But in the main, she is an object of inexplicable delight to the vast majority of men represented by the other wolf-hunter, Brys. Gradually, with the advance of civilization, woman becomes an instrument of pleasure and an object of coveted ownership and aesthetic appreciation. This attitude is decidedly one-sided and unfair to woman. Therefore, Abercrombie makes use of the Vashtian episode to uphold her claims and to prophesy what is going to happen to Love. It cannot remain thus imperfect, being one-sided. It is to develop towards perfection in course of time. The main theme of this section is based on the Biblical story of King Ahasuerus,² a sort of Tamburlaine, who rules over one hundred and twenty seven provinces from India to Ethiopia, and who dwells in his magnificent palace, called Shushan, and who boasts—"my name travels a hundred seven and twenty languages". He sends for his Queen, Vashti as he desires to show her to his underkings. But she refuses to appear at the court to be gazed at as an object of curiosity or a rare prize owned by the king Ahasuerus who typifies the proud owner of a paragon of beauty

¹ Ibid, p. 72.

² Book of Esther – Chapter I, p. 404.

is offended, and banishes the Queen from his kingdom out of impetuous self-will. Abercrombie takes up the banishment of Queen Vashti, and works out of it a strikingly artistic and dramatic poem.

Abercrombie presents king Ahasuerus as an obviously selfish and tired king living in his own ivory tower. According to the king :

“Nature, so ordered from the God,
Has given strength to man and work to do,
But to woman gave that she should be delight
For man, else like an overdriven ox
Heart-broke.”¹

He also asks :

“What is all
The world, but an awning scaffolded amid
The waste perilous Eternity, to lodge
This Heaven-wander'd princess, woman's beauty ?”²

But in Queen Vashti, Abercrombie presents a woman of keen intellect and independent spirit. The accepted idea of woman's submission to man is repulsive to her. She feels in the beginning that the world must have been designed by God ‘to be an equal dwelling-place’³ for human beings. But it has become a wicked tradition to maintain :

“God made man
For his delight and praise, and than made woman
For man's delight and praise, submit to man.
Else wherefore sex ?”⁴

This wickedness she is unable to understand. She is too proud to be a slave to man's passions. She considers beauty in those circumstances a mere waste, and that there is nothing for woman to gloat over in it. She says this to one of the bought women in the king's court. She firmly believes that

“Spirit was given
To use life as a sense for ecstasy ;
Life mixt with spirit must exult beyond

¹ Poems, p. 139.

² Ibid, p. 141.

³ Ibid, p. 142.

⁴ Ibid, p. 143.

Sex-madden'd men and sex-serving women,
 Into some rapture where sweet fleshly love
 Is as the air wherein a music rings."¹

She refuses to appear before the king and sends back with scant courtesy the messenger who has brought her the king's command. The court poet himself appears before her and praises her for her beauty. He explains to her the circumstances in which the king's command is given, and the consequences that are likely to result from her persistent disobedience. Yet she does not relent. King Ahasuerus consequently exiles her.

Vashti has a motive for her disobedience which the Bible does not account for. Abercrombie makes her the champion of woman's claims. She upholds the point of view that woman has also a part of her own to play in matters of love and that she is not merely an instrument of man's pleasure, but pleasure itself. Unlike the bought women there, she does not accept the idea that a woman's beauty pays for what she gets. Thus the Vashtian section reminds us of Tennyson's poem "The Princess" where also this age-long question of woman's rights and woman's sphere, is discussed. But Abercrombie follows generally the Biblical story, though he effects minor modifications here and there, the most important of which being the finishing touch he gives to its conclusion. He presents the vision of goddess of the power in women and of passion in men, to the outcast queen. When questioned, Vashti explains to the goddess why she has refused the life given her :

"Because I will not woman should be sin
 Amid man's life. You gods have given man
 Desire that too much knows itself ; and thence
 He is all confounded by the pleasure of us."²

So, she refuses woman's beauty also :

"I refuse woman's beauty !
 Not merely to be feasting with delight
 Man's senses, I refuse ; but even his heart.
 I will not serve. Are we to be for ever

¹ Ibid, p. 162.

² Ibid, p.174.

Love's passion in man, and never love itself?

Always the instrument, never the music?"¹

Now the goddess prophesies what is to be. She explains to Vashti that her work has been only in its process and not yet complete and that she does not leave woman amidst man's hungers, nor man amidst sinful life. She would handle them in such a way that in the end

"there shall be
Of man desiring, and of woman desired,
A single ecstasy divinely formed,
Two souls knowing themselves as one amazement."²

Ishtar further shows Queen Vashti a vision of Helen, Sappho and Theresa to explain how the spirit of woman grows from the loved to love itself. She warns the queen, however, not to take any of them for perfect.

"Take none of these for perfect: they are moods
Purifying my women to become
My unexpressive, uttermost intent."³

From the conversation between Vashti and Ishtar, we see that Abercrombie does not approve of a denial or negation of life. He suggests that one should live one's life intensely, allowing the mind to reach the things which are beyond oneself. In other words, man and woman should perfect their lives inwardly without neglecting at the same time what is outward, giving it its proper place. Then it shall be a reward in itself. The work of the goddess, the gradual development of the spirit of love in woman, is not yet complete. It is in the process of perfection. Just as an unfinished work of art, say a picture, looks ugly in the studio, the work of the Goddess Ishtar is at present imperfect as it is still incomplete, but promises to become perfect in course of time.

Charles Williams refers to the above passage of Ishtar as one whose lines may be applied to all women, but prefers not to describe those *moods* for reasons of space and fairness to the author.⁴ But for a proper understanding of the poem—

¹ Ibid, p.175.

² Ibid, p.175.

³ Ibid, p.179.

⁴ Charles Williams—Poetry at Present, p.159.

the whole poem. Emblems of Love, the reader should know what those moods are. It may be difficult to render into prose what has been so excellently expressed in verse, but still the moods should be discussed. The first vision is that of Helen, the heroine of the legend of the Trojan War, whose beautiful face (as Marlowe would say) "launched a thousand ships and burnt the topless towers of Ilium". The vision is made to tell Queen Vashti that she has been the wearied occasion for awakening irresistible lust in men luring them by her matchless physical beauty, but herself never sharing in the desire. The vision says:

"I see men's faces grin with helpless lust
About me; crooked hands reach out to please
Their hot nerves with the flower of my skin;
I see the eyes imagining enjoyment,
The arms twitching to seize me, and the minds
Inflamed like the glee-kindled hearts of fiends.
And through the world the fawning lusts
Hound me with worship of a ravenous yearning!
And I am weary of maddening men with beauty."¹

Helen thus stands for woman's physical beauty, awakening only never-satisfied lusts in man and not satisfaction itself. The second vision is that of Sappho, the famous lyric poetess of Greece. She represents not only the power of beauty but also the intensity of the emotion of love, of true love in woman. Sappho was the greatest poetess of antiquity, the chief composer of epithalamia, or wedding songs, the writer of epigrams and elegies, invocatory hymns, iambis, and monodies. The later comic poets have woven a romantic story of her love for a contemporary of hers, but the modern critical tendency is to exonerate her.² According to Abercrombie, Sappho holds that the spirit's imagination should be asserted and made to hold a light of pain and joy equal for man and woman. She explains to Queen Vashti:

"How life, breathing its fortune like sweet air,
Mixing it with the kindled heart of man,

¹ Poems, pp.176-7.

² Mitchell Carroll—*Women (in all ages and in all countries)*, Vol. on Greek Women, p.115.

May utter it proud against the double truth
Of darkness fronting him and following him
In a prevailing, burning, marvellous lie!"¹

Thus Sappho represents not the weary, passive, sensual beauty of Helen, but rather the assertive and ecstatic type of love, love of the Spirit's imagination. But she is not yet sure of her partner.

Theresa is the third vision shown to Vashti. She is a famous Christian mystic. She stands for perfect love for an ideal beloved—a distinct improvement on Helen and Sappho. The perfect ideal of Theresa is God himself! She is too proud to suffer the world's desire for her beauty. She welcomes God, the world's Maker Himself to wed and enjoy her. She offers a close parallel to St. Margaret of the Interlude, "New God: A Miracle". This mood has for its basis the Platonic framework. But Abercrombie does not pass this mood either for final. He makes Ishtar say that all these three, Helen, Sappho and Theresa, are only moods working out their way towards perfection.

Thus it is seen that in the first mood, woman is held as an object of beauty, awakening lusts in men, but herself not given to love; in the second mood she is viewed as an object of beauty given to romantic and imaginative love and in the third she is a saint given to love for the most perfect but unattainable ideal. Therefore all are in a way imperfect moods. The first is passive and sensual, the second is assertive and imaginative and the third is purely spiritual.

Abercrombie's inference is that love should not be one-sided but mutual. It should not be passive but spontaneous and reciprocal. It should not only be physical but also spiritual. Finally it should be attainable and perfect. It should not be simply a metaphorical ideal, but real and realisable! And this kind of love, according to the poet, is not impossible of attainment. It is a possibility. That is what the goddess Ishtar prophesies to the outcast queen. Thus we see that the discovery is the discovery of the instinct of love and the prophecy is the prophecy of a perfect type of love. And Vashti is introduced to give out the prophecy.

¹ Poems, p.178.

iii. Imperfection

The second section, entitled "Imperfection" deals with some aspects of imperfect love. Here Abercrombie takes up three Scotch girls who are in love. None of the three rejects love, but each actively pursues it. One, Mary, a peculiar type of woman, experiences love at first sight, of quite an eccentric variety. To please her idle whim of seeing the beheaded faces of the rebels on the Scottish gate, she goes there and 'finds the face of him she was made to love'. Though she has not seen him before, yet she suddenly falls in love with him and spends that night in dreaming about her lover, and soon wonders why *body* should play so large a part in matters of love. She thinks :

"if 'twere only
Spirit knew how to love, an easy road
My feet had down to death." ¹

But, however, she feels the need of the body as well. Only a lifeless head is left for her as an emblem of love. The moment she fetches down the head and kisses it, she feels that she should not handle it again, for it is horrible. Her love is imperfect.

Jean, the second Scotch girl, loves a living man, and not a lifeless head. She ridicules Mary for her silly love and explains that :

"One loves for kisses and for hugs and the rest." ²
She is a girl of spirit, loved by two young men, Morris and Hamish. She has her own notions of woman's love. She says :
"We don't love fellows for their skins ; we want
Something to wonder at in the way they love." ³

This notion is imperfect and one-sided for it ignores the point of view of man. Jean does not find 'this something to wonder at' in the way of Hamish to whom she is first drawn. She rejects him because he tries to force her like a cave-man. She thanks Morris for releasing her from the strong grip of Hamish and kisses him. But quite amazingly, as it seems to her,

¹ Ibid, p. 188.

² Ibid, p. 189.

³ Ibid, p. 195.

Morris bids a sudden and awkward good-night, and she quickly finds in him at the next meeting only a man of words :

“I thought, from the look he had last night, I’d found
That great, brave, irresistible love !—But this !
It’s like a man deformed, with half his limbs.”¹

Thus, in great disappointment she turns to Hamish once again, at least to satisfy her lust with his brute strength. Her love is certainly an imperfect emblem ; for chastity of spirit is lacking in her, and the qualities of head and heart lacking in her mates.

The third Scotch girl, Katrina, represents a distinctly developed type of love. She does not reject love as Vashti does. She does not love a lifeless body like Mary. Nor does she lack faithfulness like Jean. She chooses Sylvan, a better type of partner, endowed with noble qualities. But unfortunately both the lovers are afraid of love, and both fight shy of making advances. Both want to have it and cannot leave it. Again both are afraid of it and even ashamed of it as an abasement. Katrina cannot reconcile herself to marriage at all, for a man holding the heart of a woman is something dreadful to her. But strangely enough

“It is a wonderful tyranny, that life
Has no choice but to be delighted love !”²

Sylvan has been hitherto escaping the sight of woman in general and that of Katrina in particular, but now becomes obedient to love. He says :

“How pleasant and beautiful it is to be
At last obedient to love !”³

In Sylvan’s house both of them begin to talk to each other and also talk to themselves. But their love is not free and spontaneous. It cannot be said to be perfect because both Katrina and Sylvan do not think the same way as they do and say. Abercrombie therefore adopts a different technique to express their innermost thoughts, which are quite at variance with their hugging and kissing. For instance Sylvan, feels :

“O she must not kiss me !

¹ Ibid, p. 200.

² Ibid, p. 209.

³ Ibid, p. 208.

I will not be a thing excruciated
To please her passion, an anguish of delight."¹

But both of them surrender themselves to physical love and the absence of whole-hearted and joyous self-surrender is its imperfection. Thus the love presented in this episode is not perfect though it is slightly more developed than that in the other two Scottish girls. It lacks spontaneity and uprightness.

iv. Virginity and Perfection

The third section is entitled "Virginity and Perfection". The poet takes up for the theme of this section the episode of Judith from one of the Apocryphal books of "The Old Testament". The theme is the killing of Holofernes, the chief general of Nebuchadnezzar, by Judith, the virgin widow of Bethulia. Abercrombie is mainly concerned with Judith, and hence leaves out certain other details of the story. She is a woman of extraordinary beauty, subtle intellect, perfect faith in God, and heroic sacrifice. She observes all the sufferings of the besieged people of Bethulia and their heroic endurance, their despair and finally their loss of faith. She considers that Ozias's demand that people should have faith in the mercy of God for five more days, is wickedness and asks him why the people should still pretend to be God's people for five days more if they have already lost faith. The Prince (as in Abercrombie) explains to her that he has waited for so long a time since her husband's death in the hope that she might some day or other recover from her grief and receive him as her lover. He says that he has always found friendship in her eyes, in her pleasant words and still more in her pleasanter silences! His life has been the dream of loving her and being loved. Now he cannot lose any more time; for, into the midst of all that charmed delaying death has leapt. So he wants to make his death admirable by living his life of beautiful passion and sweet sense, with Judith, though for a short period of five days. Judith is shocked to hear this, and she considers his love defilement. Suddenly she hears the chorus of old men and young men and incidentally about the horrors of the besieged town.

¹ Ibid, p. 210.

She makes a sudden decision to save her city. She argues that Holofernes can do her no more harm than Ozias himself who has defiled her by his very thoughts. She at once decides to save her people. She asks herself:

“What balance can there be
In my own hurt against a nation’s pining?
God hath given me beauty, and I may
Snare with it him whose trap now bites my folk?”¹

Then she goes to the tent of Holofernes in her best robes, which pleased her dear husband when he was alive, lures the Assyrian General with her charms, and kills him when he is drunk. When she returns to the city of Bethulia with the head of Holofernes, Ozias and his people consider it the work of God and praise her as their saviour. She is not pleased with their flattery, but only shocked at it. First she coolly tells Ozias:

“I know
This only: in my home, in my soul’s chamber,
A filthy verminous beast hath made his lair,
I let him in. I let this grim lust in;
Not only did not bolt my doors against
His forcing, but even put them wide and watcht
Him coming in, to make my house his stable.
What though I killed him afterward?”²

But Ozias and his citizens surround her and take her to her house in a triumphant procession. This praise of the citizens triumphing in and over her, reveals to her the importance of virginity and the uselessness, after all, of her sacrifice. Mr. Llewellyn Jones remarks: “It is their blindness to the essential thing she has lost—their taking it for granted, that suddenly comes to her as an astounding insult. She turns upon them and bids them cease praising her, for she has not, after all, killed Holofernes. They assure her that it was none but she—could it be said that any one or more of them had done it?”³ And Judith answers:

“No: nor I.
That corpse was not his death. He is alive,

¹ Ibid, p. 227.

² Ibid, p. 242.

³ Llewellyn Jones—First Impressions, p. 157.

And will be till there is no more a world,
 Filled with his hidden hunger, waiting for souls
 That ford the monstrous waters of the world.
 Alive in you is Holofernes now,
 But fed and rejoicing; I have filled your hunger.”¹

Mr. Jones remarks: “That the poem should be read in its entirety to see the full force of Judith’s conception of what virginity is, spiritually, and her scorn of the citizens who by the manner of their acceptance of her sacrifice show her that to them her spirit, as a thing in itself, is naught.”²

Thus Abercrombie presents the idea of the virginity of soul through Judith. She now feels that it is foolish on her part to expect notions of such uprightness in the people of the world and more foolish on her part to sacrifice her uprightness of spirit with a view to preserving their lives. She feels she has been arrogant in thinking of herself as God’s helper. She says in deep anguish that for such a small mistake, God has punished her thus. She has no pride in herself to live for. So she lifts up the falchion and tries to kill herself when Ozias (who is now chastened and able to understand her character and intention) comes there and holds the lifted weapon. Then she goes into her house and spends the rest of her life in grief.

The conclusion of Judith’s episode comes out in the explanation of Ozias to his citizens after Judith’s exit into her house, after her vain attempt at suicide. He tells the citizens that they have seen a priestess of virginity in her. It is a virtue, a thing in itself ever upright, but the people have failed to note it. So, Ozias urges that they should know it now at least:

“And Judith is virginity’s appointed.
 Even by her injury she showeth us,
 As fire by violence may be revealed,
 How sovereign is virginity.”³

He therefore advises his citizens to think of how she may spend her grief hence forward and not how she slew Holofernes. He asks them to keep close that tale and that there

¹ Poems, p. 248.

² Llewellyn Jones—First Impressions, p. 158.

³ Poems, p. 254.

shall be no news going through the land out of Bethulia except that they

“At Judith’s hands had our deliverance,
But she from Holofernes and his crew
Unwilling and astonisht reverence,

As they were men with minds opprest by God.”¹

Abercrombie’s main aim in this section is the presentation of the principle of uprightness of soul, the spirit of virginity, or what he calls ‘clean fire which is necessary for the perfection of love. This spirit of uprightness, unswerving and unbending to the demands of the world, is an essential precondition of perfect love in addition to spontaneity and reciprocity.

Judith’s love is not perfect, not because she is a widow; but because, as an emblem of love, it is incomplete on account of her surrender to Holofernes. She has defiled herself and lost her virginity or uprightness of soul. It may be remembered in this context that the Bible does not mention her surrender to Holofernes. Abercrombie’s deviation from his source is therefore significant.

Now Abercrombie is in a position to picture to us what perfect love is. Perfection is the theme of “Eternal Wedding”—the next sub-section of “Virginity and Perfection”. The scheme of the entire poem would have been clearer if Abercrombie had devoted one section to ‘Virginity’ and another to ‘Perfection’ and dealt with the subject matter of “Eternal Wedding” in the latter. However, it can be explained that the Judith-episode deals with virginity and the “Eternal Wedding” with the perfection of love, and that Abercrombie has given us a joint title “Virginity and Perfection”. The “Eternal Wedding” is really the highest peak which the poet reaches, building there a magnificent palace for love, “prefiguring the ultimate union of the conflicting powers of life in one perfect rapture,”² as illustrated in the lines :

“I have

Golden within me the whole fate of man;

¹ Ibid, p. 254.

² M. C. Sturgeon—*Studies of Contemporary Poets*, p. 30.

That every flesh and soul belongs to one
 Continual joyward ravishment, whose end
 Is here, in this perfection. Now I know—
 For all my speculation scareth up,
 A bird taking Eternity for air,—
 Now being mixt with thee, in the burning midst,
 Of Beauty for my sense and mind and soul,—
 That life hath highest gone which hath most joy.”¹

Love has now reached its perfection, for both Man and Woman (Abercrombie does not find samples for this consummation) feel themselves, though divided natures, to be the twin elements of joy in being Love. In that world of happy “Eternal Wedding”

“Life is not life, but the desire of God,
 Himself desiring and himself accepting.
 Now what was prophecy in us is made
 Fulfilment: we are the hour and we are the joy,—
 We in our marvellousness of single knowledge,—
 Of spirit breaking down the room of fate
 And drawing into his light the greeting fire
 Of God,—God known in ecstasy of Love
 Wedding himself to utterance of himself.”²

This is Abercrombie's ideal conception of love. No doubt, the author now dwells in an atmosphere which is altogether ‘too high’. But it is a glorious possibility, worthy of achievement. To envisage love as such an ideal, as a harmonious blend of the conflicting powers of sense, mind and soul, is to attain the highest reach of the poetic imagination.

The marriage song appended to “Emblems of Love” reminds us of Spenser's ‘Epithalamion’. In both these songs we notice perfect melody, a rare sense of beauty, splendid imagination, moral purity and seriousness and delicate idealism which make even common things beautiful. “The Marriage Song” and the charming “Epilogue” are “full of memories of Keats and Morris, like a posy of old-fashioned

¹ *Poems*, p. 255.

² *Ibid*, p. 263.

Emblems of Love

flowers".¹ Referring to the same song, H.I.A. Fausset says that the importance of its lyrical value is not "so much music as its sensitive apprehension of truth", which has music of its own on account of its "balance between accurate observation and personal feeling".²

¹ Proceedings of the British Academy, 1939, p. 400.

² H.I.A. Fausset—Studies in Idealism, pp. 271-2.

Idyls

Why to yon mountain turns the musing eye,
Whose sunbright summit mingles with the sky ?
Why do those cliffs of shadowy tint appear
More sweet than all the landscape shining near ?
'Tis distance lends enchantment to the view,
And robes the mountain in its azure hue.

--*Thomas Campbell*

Generally speaking, an idyl is 'a little picture'. It has neither a set structure nor a pattern of rhyme. It is either narrative or lyrical. The conception of the idyl formed by poets is that it should represent a scene, a mood, an imagined vision, a landscape, a romance or an incident marked by pathos, and this should be expressed as the poet sees it. And Abercrombie satisfies all these conditions in his idyls.

i. Mary and The Bramble

The first of Abercrombie's Idyls, "Mary and the Bramble" is an early poem written as long ago as 1910 and reprinted in the book of the "Twelve Idyls" in 1928. This is a highly metaphysical poem with too much of the intellectualism characteristic of the author. We read in the Bible the mysterious account of the birth of Christ, how Mary has been found with child of the Holy Ghost before she and her husband Joseph came together.¹ Further details are given in a different gospel as to how Gabriel, the angel, goes to the Virgin Mary and tells her the divine intent and praises her for being thus highly favoured: "Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women."² This has provided Abercrombie a sufficient nucleus for speculating on the life of the

¹ Gospel of St. Matthew-118.

² St. Luke-128.

Virgin Mary who won the high favour of the Lord. He describes her as an example of pristine purity, exquisite sensitiveness, greatest modesty and unflinching faith in the Lord. Speaking of this poem, R.A. Scott-James says :

“We see him in his gentler mood ; the philosophical conception of the mortal in human beings struggling to drag down the immortal is treated allegorically, with beautiful poetic imagery.”¹ He starts the poem with a fine description of her ‘rapt girlhood’ and the ‘blue ceremony’ of morning air. As usual, Mary goes to ‘wash her soul’ one early morning and as she walks ‘through meadows flowering with happiness’, the air lays honours of gentle dew upon her head and the sun loves ‘with golden stare the marvellous behaviour of her hair’. But on account of her visions of the Lord she does not take notice of them. The poet says that no angel ever sent to God such a worship.

Now, Abercrombie imagines that during one such vision’d walk beside a brake, Mary has an “attack” of a bramble which tears her dress and harms her ‘hidden white virginities’. Mary is so sensitive, chaste and modest, that even this slight scratching of a bramble on her breast, is sufficient to startle her and make her recoil as if her virginity had been defiled. To describe this highly perturbed state of her mind, Abercrombie devises an imaginary conversation between Mary and the Bramble and it is highly symbolic of the poet’s manner of thinking.

“To it she spake, with such a gentle air.

That the thing might not choose but answer her.”²

Mary views all the world with sisterly affection. She wonders why the Bramble should harm her instead of exulting in her worship. She considers it to be a guilt to be pierced by the thorns. But the Bramble belongs to the human world and to harm others is consistent with human nature. The world naturally, instead of rejoicing at the spiritual progress of others simply waits for an opportunity to inflict pain on them with feelings of hatred and malice. Now Mary is looking towards God and if the world cannot successfully drag her down to earth, it at least show its wickedness by harming her. Therefore

¹ R. A. Scott-James – Fifty Years of English Literature (1900–50), p. 120.

² Pomes, p.277.

to Mary, the world now appears to be full of sin, wrong and misery — retarding influences over 'her upward meaning mind'. She understands that if she turns her love to the world, it may charm her life by turning it 'to dream All delicious love to seem.' But if she turns towards God, she has to fight against the injuries inflicted by the world.

"Thou must break through the injuries
And shames I will about thee wind,
The hooks and thickets of my kind ;" ¹

She now realises that the whole earth's nature will come to be full of the Bramble's purpose against her. She fears that men may use her bosom 'worse than a bramble's handling'. So, with an undaunted courage and faith, she should come untarnished 'like, charioting in a victory'.

Mary returns home and now all her 'filmy visions of the world' are whirled away by 'closer spiritual turbulence'. With such love of virtue and fear of vice, she heals her injury with redoubled vigour of faith in God. Thus she comes out purer from this minute test and deserves to be the mother of the purest of souls. Now is the time for the Lord's favour to be conferred upon her :

"When Gabriel with the fiery-flower'd wand
Would part the tissue of her bodily ken,
And to the opening all God's shining men
Would crowd to watch the message that he took
To earthly life : 'Hail, Mary, that dost look
Delightful to the Lord ; I bid thee know

That answering God's own love thy womb shall throe." ²

This idea of the annunciation is taken from the Bible, but the interest of the Idyl lies in the romantic way in which Abercrombie makes Mary experience the filmy visions of the world, after an attack of the symbolic bramble which prophesies to her that in spite of the injuries and against the purposes of the world, her womb shall thrive ! Thus Abercrombie exhibits his skill in his choice of moments of intense feeling for poetic presentation.

Reviewing this idyl, *The Times Literary Supplement* points out that though it has many beauties of detail, "the whole is

¹ Ibid, p.279.

² Ibid, p. 280.

rather pretty than beautiful, because the details have no cumulative power".¹ Further, the theme is perhaps, too primitive for the mind of the poet, who not being content with its simplicity has covered it with incongruous ornaments like Crashaw and has rather obscured than illustrated his theme, with his rhetoric. But the reviewer says in conclusion : "In fact, the poem seems a game, not only of language but of thought ; and at the end we merely admire the skill with which it has been played." ²

ii. The Innocents

If 'spiritual turbulence' is the theme of the first idyl, a study of the moment of a desperate and intense feeling of sorrow of a mother at the slaughter of her child, is the theme of the next idyl, "The Innocents". We know "Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men".³ A widow after a long day of her toil returns home musing over the love of her dead husband and living son. With a smile she looks at the stars in the bright endless heaven, and is at once reminded of her lover. Then she bursts out in intense feeling of pathos :

"You cannot look me down ! Here on the earth
Stumbling and tired and unnoticeable
I go ; and you are bright and endless heaven.
Yet I can live as measureless as you,
O darkness, in the sorrow of my love." ⁴

But she quickly remembers that her son is the bright star of her life and her joy in her boy is as delightful as the starlight :

"My life is like the clustering of starlight
In silver dances of its fiery glee :

¹ The Times Literary Supplement, p. 332, Sep. 14, 1911.

² Ibid.

³ St. Matthew-216.

⁴ Poems, p. 280.

My shining life adoring with its love
The little laughing son my lover gave me.”¹

With these thoughts she hastens home to meet her child. But the house is dark. Something within her tells her that something has gone wrong. She yearns to hold the boy that used to run to her. She finds her son murdered by the soldiers of Herod. Her old mother, however, offers consolation to her that the advent of Messiah shall be a blessing. This appears to be nothing short of jeering at the bereaved mother and she cries out :

“Will you jeer at me ?
My baby murder’d, and Messiah come ?”²

She curses her for allowing Herod’s soldiers to catch her beautiful darling. The hope of the old mother is universal, being a faith in the coming of Messiah on to the Earth having escaped slaughter. In that hope, she says, they would forget their misery ! But the feeling of the widowed daughter is purely maternal and personal. The fact that she is selfish in wishing that her son should have been alive, has not, however, lessened the poignancy of her complaint which Abercrombie makes her utter in the most touching manner ! She does not want Messiah. She wants her boy, her nimble boy, living and laughing. Then she bursts out bitterly :

“But let it be holiness mounting to heaven,
I will go with it ; bitterly into heaven
I’ll haunt it ; it shall never be rid of me ;
It shall remember what it has done to me,
My voice shall be an injury to it for ever.”³

Thus the two different feelings evoked in the old mother and the widow (may be two innocent people), those of resignation coupled with faith in the advent of Messiah as seen in the old woman, and those of sorrow and love for the innocent son murdered, mixed with feelings of hatred even for Mary and Messiah’s kingdom, as seen in the widow, are naturally and vividly described in this idyl.

¹ Ibid, pp. 280-1.

² Ibid, p. 283.

³ Ibid, p. 284.

iii. The Death of a Friar

In the third idyl, Abercrombie presents Mary as the Queen of Heaven. The theme is the death of a pious man who is a Friar. This idyl is the most visionary of his poems. The Friar leads a humble and virtuous life and remains till the end an unregarded serviceable man. Only some good people attend on him when he lies on his death-bed for some time, and then leave him to die in peace.

Death comes to him, not as expected by others, but in a peculiarly blissful manner, the visions of which a highly speculative genius like Abercrombie alone can give. Mary, the Queen of Heaven, in all the joyful light of green, now appears before the Friar. Three angels, 'three tranquil majesties of fire' attend on her. At this the Friar cries in passion: "Mother of God, may I not die at length?" In response to this request and at the instance of Mary, the three angels administer to him three electuaries one after one. As he is nursed with the first sacred food, Mary says, "Take now thy first delight." Consequently he feels he is 'stript of labour, disease'. He becomes aware of health, 'quick and beating'. 'Rejoicing knowledge' returns to him and he lies in 'mere simplicity of joy'.

Then Mary touches his head, and he is roused in great dread, dreading any greater bliss, like a child:

"No more, no more! I want no more than this!

This was enough!"¹

Now Mary smiles again and the second angel administers the second electuary. She bids him take his next delight. Then he experiences:

"Nay, such a speed and such perplexity
Of pleased sense and mind's beatitude,
Not to be named at all, not understood,
No spectre of it fantastically kenn'd,

The joy his spirit came to in the end."²

At first fragrance steals to him and holds fast his mind.

"Sense to sense

Confused; and medley of sweet excellence

¹ Ibid, p. 288.

² Ibid, p. 289.

Poured into him vibrating, like a tide
 Taking a narrow harbour and magnified
 In surging of its waters to be there."¹
 Then he breaks out of sense and learns to *Be* and not *Know*!
 When Mary is about to get the third electuary administered, the
 Friar now exclaims :

"O let me be! Thou wilt not give me, no,
 Thou must not give me more! For I have been
 Where no more can be borne: O dost thou mean
 To kill me with delight?"²

But the Queen of Heaven imperiously smiles and the third electuary is administered to him. And the final delight given to him is :

"And heaven was gone;
 And in his last delight he lay alone.
 The morning found his blessed face, and there
 The joy that is too great for life to bear."³

Thus according to Abercrombie, the death of the pious people that have achieved their end, consists of three stages, the first transcending the physical plane, and the second transcending the sensuous one and enjoying the state of *Being*. This state is conceived as speed, since all the world that exists or is in the state of *Being*, is in a continual flux, according to advanced physicists. The third state is left by implication to be one that transcends both, i.e., the state of God whence the world, with the state to *Be*, emanates. This is an original contribution of Abercrombie to modern thought. That is why it may be regarded as the most visionary of his idyls.

iv. At Endor

According to the Bible, Saul in his fear, forsaken of God, seeks a witch at Endor and with her help, he sees the ghost of Samuel and requests him thus :

"I am sore distressed, for the Philistines make war against me, and God is departed from me, and answereth me no more,

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid, p. 291.

³ Ibid.

neither by prophets nor by dreams: therefore I have called thee, that thou mayest make known unto me what I shall do.”¹ Basing on this information Abercrombie devises an imaginary conversation between the witch and the ghost of Samuel, in which Samuel expatiates on the beauty and the divinity of God, condemning the art of the witch. The ghost of Samuel is surprised to know from the witch that he is now under her sorcery and asks her what he should do for his release. The witch tells him that her will is his Jehovah now, since he is only a ghost (after death) and makes him realise how vile it is to die. When he had life and God with him, the light was dangerous to the witch who with her art could only burrow into holes. So, the Ghost of Samuel says:

“So falling into death my soul is brought

To flow along thy will, and be mixture with thy thought.”² The witch then derides Samuel by pointing out to him, how poorly he has been rewarded by his Lord, and how utterly helpless he is under her sorcery. The ghost though forced to admit his discomfiture at her hands, still views her with equanimity. He is however content that while alive he had, as a prophet, realised the ‘immense heavenly intelligence’. Finally he defies the witch and asserts his unflinching faith:

“Yea, am I dead and thine?—But I have been
Alive, and I was God’s. I am content.”³

His achievement cannot be questioned by any power, and in that knowledge, the ghost derives his consolation. This is in accordance with what Mr. Frederick Page regards as the significance of this conversation: “A man who is conscious that he has fought the good fight will acquiesce in what happens after he is dead, including what happens to him”.⁴ And it is in Samuel’s philosophy that we find the message of Abercrombie. One thing is to be noted in this context. In spite of Abercrombie’s knowledge of the scriptures, he gives a completely unorthodox interpretation of the relations of Samuel and the Witch. Abercrombie makes an artistic use of the raising of the ghost. He does

¹ I. Samuel, 2815.

² Poems, p. 293.

³ Ibid, p. 295.

⁴ Letter from Mr. Frederick Page, London, dt. 29 April, 1946.

not affirm it, nor dismiss it. He takes the situation and makes a dramatic use of it and raises the two questions—what happens to man after death? Does he remain what he was in life or lose some of his power? The ghost does not have the previous power as he rises at the call of the witch who tries to persuade him to her cult. So, the situation is a challenge between good and evil and the central idea is that goodness will not renounce God even in adversity.

v. Witchcraft—New Style

The idea of a witch summoning the ghost of Samuel from underground is of some interest to a modern reader, as it suggests a most modern craft, namely hypnotism. This is, according to the poet, a new style of witchcraft, which rouses bitter feelings of indignation in him. If in the previous idyl, he strikes a highly metaphysical note in the reply of the ghost of Samuel and offers thereby an indirect message to the world, in the present idyl he appeals to the direct emotions of his readers and sounds a clear warning against the evil practice of hypnotism.

The author begins "Witchcraft—New Style" with a highly lyrical passage describing a summer evening and the surrounding natural phenomena. Presently, a slatternly woman appears at a public house, and purchases her bottleful of ale. The other customers there are surprised at her way of hypnotism (the new style of witchcraft!) and one of them asserts that she cannot go on with her ways of witchcraft, as it is against nature. But in reply she assures them that there is nothing to prevent her from her pleasure and even asserts that she could 'fetch a free man back' by her art. She says he should come running:

"Running: unless
He's broke his leg, and then he'll have to come
Crawling: but he will come".¹

But as her words are suspected to be mere bragging, she continues:

"I give his mind a twitch, and up he comes
Tumbling home to me. Whatever work he's at,
He drops the thing he holds like red-hot iron

¹ *Poems*, p. 298.

And runs—runs till he falls down like a beast
Pole-axt, and grunts for breath ; then up and on,
No matter does he know the road or not :
The strain I put on his mind will keep him going
Right as a homing-pigeon.”¹

Strangely enough, it is soon found out that she has not been bragging, for there comes a man running slowly and desperately and pounding like a machine. This is really an act of devilry and it invariably rouses indignation in the minds of the spectators ; and the poem closes with an emphatic protest from the men in the house, which is the cry of the author himself against hypnotism, that “The law should have a say to that, by God !”²

In this connection it is interesting to study the entirely adverse and sceptical point of view regarding witchcraft, presented by Mr. Edward Thompson in his “Thoughts on the Islip witch” which is ‘a carefully worded answer’ to Abercrombie’s poem.³ Mr. Thompson cites Harold the poet and asserts that the shooting of a girl on the false pretext of her being a witch was wrong and all ideas regarding witchcraft were irrelevant traditional nonsense. But it is difficult to say if Mr. Edward Thompson is correct. He denies it in a rational way. But, one cannot deny existence of mystery in the universe. Abercrombie accepts that there was an old style of witchcraft because there were witches. There are recorded evidences to show their existence but it is difficult to prove if the witches were real or faked ones. Edward Thompson dismisses the belief as irrelevant. But, the modern experiments made in America bring to light the existence of things like hypnotism and clairvoyance. The fineness of Abercrombie’s perception is that forces of evil exist even today, in some form, call it old or new, and that those subtle forces can be mastered by men who can do things like magic. The powers one employs for good purposes are the same as those used for bad purposes. So Edward Thompson is incorrect in his attack.

¹ Ibid, pp. 298-9.

² Ibid, p. 300.

³ Herbert Palmer—Post-Victorian Poetry, p. 298.

vi. In the Dunes

In the next idyl, Abercrombie describes the feelings and visions roused in the minds of a 'bright-minded' boy and a girl who have spent some time among the dunes. They stroll among the dunes with warm mist around them. They naturally speak of the Sea that looms large in their eyes appearing to claim them, and dwell at length on the various moods in which the Sea presents itself to them. One is the battling Sea struggling to conquer the land. Another mood is the 'calm sea crooning to itself in mist', which 'means most when it is like today, in hide and seek'. This veiled Sea puts in the boy's mind the story of the wicked emperor in Rome who is punished with many disagreeable dreams probably on account of his own wickedness. In one dream, the emperor sees an extremely old man, with sorrowful shaggy face, lugging 'a trailing heaviness of broad swaying enormous water signifying loads of lust'. It is the ancient ghost of the Sea and it bows to the emperor and looks up. Soon the emperor knows the secret of the Sea and his endless task. Suddenly he sees 'a thundering vision of his own' and soon the green rage of the Sea drowns and he wakes up "to labour his old dull routine of evil and drudge in habits of familiar sin". The poet seems to base this story on the weird influence of the calm Sea, as described in the subsequent conversations between the boy and the girl that they see a living thing coming up from water near them and it is a spirit dreadful, and loathing them with foul desire, 'searching for something it can master'. "But it is held back. It comes no nearer for all its bitter longing, as if it were a tethered thing"; for it cannot cross the mound of dunes. But the girl's remark on the emperor in the dream is highly significant. She says:

"This is just hawering. My old peevish aunt
Is guinea-gold with jaundice, and her sight
Stains the whole world about her dismal yellow;
Your emperor was like that. There's no real evil."¹

The question whether there is no real evil is a side issue. The poet's main purpose is to represent the various moods of the Sea, or to interpret Nature. He splits the lyric into two

¹ *Poems*, p. 306.

parts and speaks in a dramatic form. But the moods of the Sea are really the moods of man, as the Sea projects itself into the moods of man or rather fits into them. The figure of speech employed here is Pathetic Fallacy and it has been wonderfully worked out. The Sea has many voices. T. S. Eliot also deals with the same subject in his *Four Quartets*. Abercrombie has simply anticipated the moderns and he is unique in his original and novel exploration.

vii. Six Men of Calais

Speaking of "Six Men of Calais" and "Ham and Eggs" which are relatively simpler than any of his other idyls, we feel as though we are relieved of a great strain. In the first of these two idyls, Abercrombie describes the psychological reactions of six notable men of Calais sent as hostages to an English King. We know from history that Edward II demanded in 1347 six distinguished citizens of Calais to be sent as hostages to the English camp in "half-naked bodies" and "haltered necks", walking barefoot on the biting, chill, snowy ground. The idyl is a study of the psychology of the poor victims that offered their lives for the sake of their city, but we cannot fail to note therein the deep sympathy of the author.

The Mayor shows his dignity in forming the six men up in twos and conducting the march like soldiers. He is too noble to see sorrow expressed for him, for he says: "I 'ld liefer far be hanged than cried upon." Unmindful of what is to befall him, he concerns himself with the order of the march and he points it out when his friend, Andrieu D' Andres, is out of step. He proudly feels he alone can address the King of England, for he is the Mayor of Calais.

The other, Pierre De Wissant, addresses the citizens in a gallant little speech and exhibits his great patriotism and pride in the future glory:

"Citizens of Calais, weep not for us.
Enough for us we save you; you shall see,
Once we are past this little cloud of death,
Our names are launcht on such a towering flight
The sun goes not so high."¹

¹ Ibid, p. 310.

The rest of the idyl concerns itself in enlisting our sympathy for the noble victims and contempt for the cruel victors, because Six men with only shirts to wear, are made to walk as in a procession. Jacques (another hostage) tells the Mayor (when the latter is just thinking of what he has to say to the English King), that all is in vain, for the king is only a beast void of any mercy :

“No pleading with the beast ! I’ll give you all

The speech you want ; tell him to go to hell.”¹

And the poem ends with the pointed indignant remark :
 “Barbarous ! These barbarous English !”

viii. Asmodeus in Egypt

The next idyl is a beautiful poem on the sense of smell. The poet, Abercrombie, indulges in the enjoyment of the sweet fragrances of nature of an evening ‘in a thicketted place where thrushes and primroses celebrate spring’, or ‘in summer morning when burnet-roses sweeten sea-breezes’, and recalls to his mind the primitive idea of a spirit enjoying such smell. Asmodeus is that spirit who has attracted the poet in Abercrombie for his idyllic material. He presents to us in this idyl, which is of great psychological importance, a vivid picture of the spirit’s reaction to the successive states of his experiences under the bondage of the sense of smell.

Asmodeus is the name of an evil spirit that strangles the seven husbands of Sara, the daughter of Raguel. This is a mythological story taken from “The Book of Tobit” in the “Apocrypha”. There we read how Tobias drives away the wicked spirit, Asmodeus, following the instructions of his guiding angel, by raising a smoke after placing the liver and heart of a fish on embers. “The which smell the evil spirit had smelled, he fled into the utmost parts of Egypt, and the angel bound him.”² Asmodeus, in the poem, has put all his being in the sense of smell, and then thinks he has learned that men (Solomon and Tobias) have put all their being in sexual desire. He is wrong ; Tobias has not, whatever Solomon may have done.

¹ Ibid, p. 312.

² Book of Tobit—83.

Asmodeus broods over his lamentable life, with his lust for Sara, his strangling of her seven husbands, his attempt to murder Tobias the eighth husband, and finally his fall. He says:

“And a leap aloft like letting fly a catapult,

And the stink after me up to the stars ;

Then the long crazy glide of me, crumpled and corroded,

In swerves and somersaults spinning to the ground.”¹

Abercrombie makes this evil spirit recollect how he formerly prayed to Beelzebub to grant him the power, the sense of smell, and how he once wandered over all the parts of Lebanon enjoying all the savours of the Earth, how once he was caught in Solomon's spell and drank the wine drained in his well and how he suffered the imprisonment of being sealed up in a jar left to the clemency of the merciless waves of the sea, (for not assisting him in the construction of a temple) and how during his confinement he was haunted with dreams and phantoms of Solomon's pleasure. He also visualizes how, when the spell broke, he doted on Sara 'in fiction of the bliss he could not enjoy', for he had the sense of smell only and not the power of enjoyment. But all the same, he did not allow any one to enjoy her.

Asmodeus is no doubt, an evil spirit. But his evil is not so much in question. How is life experienced by human beings and disembodied spirits? Asmodeus wants reality seen on the spiritual plane. On the physical plane, he cannot have sensual experience, because only one sense is granted to him. It is a fascinating theme for a poet to feel how a spirit feels the world—the world which one feels only through the five senses—with only one sense. He enjoys fine smells as in Lebanon and hates all dirty smells. But, his passion for Sara results in anguish because he cannot enjoy the sex experience. He loves her but his love is only that of a Spirit's perception, unreal, unlike that of human beings. He kills the seven husbands of Sara out of wickedness or even jealousy. But he cannot have any positive sexual delight as he is a spirit with power to enjoy with one sense only. So, he is full of agony, and wants to be spirit again to live in the element of knowledge of perception alone. Abercrombie chooses Asmodeus for the point that he is

¹ Poems, p. 314.

a spirit. Probably the poet's view is that abstraction is Satanic, while full living with all its joys and sorrows, angelic.

ix. Ham and Eggs

This is an idyl of vivid realism and racy dialogue. Of course, we see in Abercrombie a tendency to portray the things he abhors in the world. But, we cannot fail to notice the fire of indignation burning behind such realism. He mixes it with humour to keep up the interest. "Ham and Eggs" is an example. In it, he shows his disgust against the prevalent nefarious trade in certain inns near the sea, by the coastwise pathways and frequented by the holiday troops. Ham and Eggs is their only fare but yet the inns flourish very well. The inn-keepers employ harlots to seduce the young after luring them to tea and plates of fry:

"A wench will have him by the sleeve,
Whisper seriously in his ear,
And deftly show her petticoat frills."¹

The author describes how poverty has compelled a particular women to take to the life of a harlot in a seaside public house, how she carries on with her job for some time, and finally bids good-bye to her mistress (an old lady that kept the shop) and her job, when news of her mother's death reaches her. She feels that her work there is finished and that she can pick up easy money on her own. She leaves the place, but the old lady continues her old game and she thinks that another wench will come to take her place; and so she may still be there, luring them in. The youth who has been lured in and who has been swindled of his money, silently stumbles out of the house, repenting that 'he has lit among the maniacs!'

x. Ryton Firs

In 1911, the poet migrated to Gallows, at Ryton and the atmosphere there was most congenial to him. He was very much inspired by his home and the beauty of the country side, rich in orchards. He used to take a walk to the end of the hills nearby to enjoy the company of his friends and the

¹ Ibid, p. 323.

scenery of the distant cathedrals below. Under such influences the poet wrote "Ryton Firs".

It is an exquisitely lyrical poem written on the woods, giving a visionary picture of the fir trees and the inspiration one would get from them in Herefordshire and Gloucestershire. The poem is addressed to Abercrombie's sons and in it "the ravages of war are seen in their monstrosity through the atmosphere of English woods and countryside".¹ How the poet's mind responds to the destruction of the woods is forcibly stated at the very beginning: 'The ground now looks ashamed, to be shorn so bare'. Then after a thought-provoking description how 'Ryton Firs, like Europe fell', the poet draws an image as an offering to the ghost of the fir trees which gave fine shade to them once. This is a splendid example of his creative genius.

The poet now dreams that the Ryton Firs are alive again. He proceeds to describe the talk of trees, the grass that grows as wool upon a southdown weather's back, and the pools golden with the daffodil light. The poet, then, most naturally indulges in the description of a glad dance, quite in consonance with his dreaming mood. In an outburst of joy he says:

"Follow my heart, my dancing feet,
Dance as blithe as my heart can beat:
Dancing alone can understand
What a heavenly way we pass
Treading the green and golden land,
Daffodillies and grass."²

Thus the idyl is filled with pleasant music and closes with a beautiful dance song as befitting the joyous mood spontaneously revived at the mere recollection of his past happy experiences among the Ryton Firs.

xi. The Olympians

This is a variation on the Apollonian and Dionysian theme. In this the influence of Keats is manifest. Keats made an attempt to interpret Greek mythology in his "Hyperion",

¹ A. Chakravarthi—The dynasts and the post-war age in Poetry, p. 173.

² Poems, p. 335-6.

imagining a series of hierarchies of gods. The unique character of "Hyperion" and its chief contribution lies in that it contains not merely intellectual classification of the gods and goddesses by referring these to the ground principles which they symbolise, but also in that it lays bare the essential development of the old mythology through a varied succession of stages. In each stage Keats has envisaged development, movement and the passing over of the old order to the new, the face of clash and conflict. Its allegorical significance is that the greater beauty always succeeds the less, gradually unfolding through a succession, of forms. But the poem is only a fragment.

Abercrombie too has a similar conception; but he works it out completely and in a manner peculiarly his own, giving us a vision of his main spiritual thought—the evolution of life through varying forms into 'fairer degrees of loveliness'. In the primitive times people perceived in matter certain forms or patterns of beauty from their day-to-day experience. Soon, they began to objectify all forms of sensuous beauty they met with in their life and deified them and gave them names. This objectified deification of form or pattern is represented by Zeus, the supreme sovereign of the Olympians, of whom Apollo was one. According to the poet, Bacchus was originally in the fold of the Olympians as a wine god, but having left them refusing to be a god, he now returns and fills man with the strength and vision they needed'. This return symbolises the realisation by men of the importance of spiritual force—the unchanging energy which remains eternal among the changing forms of this mundane world—'the measureless force for ever passing into and beyond the measured form of the world', with the form however abiding. He explains to Apollo why the Olympian gods must die and then he tells him what he is.

Abercrombie provides a peculiar setting to the poem—the conversation of an old crone, a tender of corpses, with her son on the subject of the shaping of corpses and the eating of sins, the symbolism of which is really obscure though the main theme of the idyl, the interpretation of the mythological gods, is rather plain and easy. The old crone and her son may symbolise Mary and Christ. They may also symbolise the representatives of the new order. But they are crudely imagined to be concerned on the trade of tending corpses and eating sins.

The idyl begins with the description of Apollo bringing the corpse of Zeus to an old crone and her son while they are engaged in a conversation on the propriety of earning a livelihood by performing the ceremony of 'eating sins' of the dead before their burial. The son honestly cannot understand what his mother means, when she says :

"They give me their sins,
Like children laying pranks of mischief on
Their easy nurse, who smiles to bear the blame."¹

This is the setting. But the main theme is that of the Olympians. Zeus, the Father of Heaven, famous for his ideal wisdom, tries to win Bacchus by admitting him into his fold under the name of Dionysus. But Dionysus goes away from Zeus and the other gods leaving them in wonder. Then Zeus assembles his undergods when he foresees the birth of a new god. The advent of Bacchus is indeed the death-knell of the Olympian gods. Zeus now sinks to an infant shape and dies. Appollo brings the corpse to Crete to the old crone to end him where he was born. Bacchus now suddenly appears before him amidst tremendous light and it is here that the poet devises a conversation between Appollo and Bacchus, which contrasts the worship of form and that of the spirit; the uncertain dream of the world and the dream of that unchanging energy; the small shapeliness of the world of gods and the infinite element; 'the seeming world' and the true world.

But the agony of Appollo is great, as Zeus has already died, and as he himself is dying. Yet he hopes "though Bacchus will continue to lure men on with dreams of infinity, in time they will again perceive and desire the beauty of established order and new gods of shapeliness will arise to conquer eterna flux"²

This idealistic latter half of the idyl might be called a modern *Hyperion*, as Douglas Bush rightly considers. Prof. Oliver Elton says: "It is hard, for all their eloquence, to make much of the old crone, the tender of corpses, who has 'eaten the sins of Zeus'; of the decrepit Appollo who brings to her the

¹ Ibid, p. 342.

² Douglas Bush—*Mythology and Romantic Tradition in English Poetry*, p. 431.

corpse of Zeus—for there has been a Crucifixion, and now the old gods must die; or of Bacchus—Dionysus, who foretells that nevertheless there is to be a new reign of happiness and beauty upon earth”.¹

The transition of thought becomes easy on a close understanding of the poem. Bacchus—Dionysus who has to join the Olympian hierarchy comes at its decay and represents the advent of Christianity. The Olympian gods were embodied in form whereas under the Christian auspices, God has no form but is infinity. So there is revolt against the form, into the formless. The last speech of Apollo, the dying Olympian god, is significant. He says that infinity should be embodied in mortal form and that the former should be expressed in each part of life. This is Abercrombie's message. What Bacchus describes is Christianity released. But Abercrombie suggests that it should stand not only for what Bacchus says, but also for what Apollo says, that is, imprisoning the infinite in the finite. In other words, one should proceed from the finite to the infinite and bring back the infinite into the finite things. Apollo's is the last word in the idyl, and herein we find the clue to Abercrombie's original thinking.

xii. Zagreus

Abercrombie used Zagreus, a Greek god now completely forgotten, for his own poetic vision. It is a peculiar characteristic with the poet to take a Classical or Biblical theme and discover capacity for new vision. All civilised literature instinctively passes Zagreus by or almost figures him as a shadowy Hades.² Abercrombie takes this obscure figure for his theme of the last idyl and represents him as the creator of man. He now lies in hell imagining mankind, his creation. The poet makes Zagreus stand for freedom and beauty in Nature, and makes him speculate on the 'circular fate' and hope for the return of better days—the reliving of his sublimely fortunate life of former glory as a god “on the great height of the wheeling world elate.” The musings of Zagreus are all quite human in

¹ Proceedings of the British Academy, 1939, p. 404.

² Webster—New International Dictionary.

character and quite characteristic of the author's manner of thinking.

Man's life, Zagreus says, has become "creature and symbol" of his anguish. In other words, man has made himself a misery with his machines, in spite of his notions of beauty and freedom, by bringing about wretchedness to himself with his construction of towns, factories, furnances. Thus man's life becomes the symbol of the misery of Zagreus's mind, and so he remains a tortured god lying in hell and imagining mankind. But, he is yet optimistic and thinks :

"And still I must create, and make my night
Of darkness and dishonour quick and alight
With spectacle of life."¹

He dreams of a change for the better, speculating on the circular fate, and hopes for the return of a happy time when he can re-live his sublimely fortunate life of former glory as a god with restored delight. He takes up a brighter view of man's fate and incidentally his own. It has been that in the world's changes, the tide of darkness fell over him. Now he hopes that, that tide will naturally pass over and he shall be himself again. For 'what has been, will be again'. Then he proceeds to indulge in what he is going to enjoy :

"Everywhere colour and shape and sound
Of joy divinely mine, my own."²

Now the 'sunny hills', 'forests in fragrant flame of scarlet blossoming', 'luminous ocean', 'the whispering shiver made in spinneys of willow silver-grey', 'towering peaks', 'the heavenly space of light and air'—all make the fallen god realise his radiance of joy. And Zagreus hopes :

"And once again in lovely glee,
Soared out of joy's perplexity
The pure immortal ecstasy,
Perfection of the god in me."³

The significance of the revival of Zagreus is that in course of time men shall realise that the so-called comforts of the 'Machine' are only detrimental to true happiness, and hence

¹ Poems, p. 357.

² Ibid, p. 360.

³ Ibid, p. 359.

return to a life in simple 'nature', free from conventionalism and mechanical and artificial contrivances. Then, theirs shall be a world of real joy.

In this poem, there is an indirect indictment of machinery. The poet is evidently disgusted with modern civilisation, as he has already explicitly condemned it in his "Indignation—an Ode". This last idyl may be taken as the author's prophecy that the days of machine-worship will end, giving place to those of Nature-worship. Prof. Oliver Elton says, "Zagreus ('he who seizes'), who is Zagreus Dionysus now in hell, will hereafter, as in the past, 'note the whispering shiver made. In spinneys of willows silver-grey'; and here the birds, and experience 'a pure immortal ecstasy'; enjoying the 'music of intelligence and creating his own image of beautiful life'."¹ Prof. Oliver Elton also says: "It is clear how these visions accord with the poet's own human ideals and his mystical creed or hope. All this finds yet ampler expression in the completed six acts of "The Sale of Saint Thomas (1931)".² Whatever Prof. Elton says, one thing is certain. Abercrombie is not a regular philosopher. He is essentially a poet. He is intellectually lyrical like Donne and Meredith. He does not work out any definite system of Philosophy though he has philosophic perceptions. He is unorthodox but he is not a sceptic. The author of *Zagreus* cannot be sceptic, as the latter is a profound optimist.

Summing up the philosophy emerging out of Abercrombie's *Idyls*, a few words may be in order. Only some of them contain philosophical ideas. In *Mary and the Bramble*, he seems to suggest that the mortal in human beings is in perpetual struggle to drag down the immortal in them. So, they should be wary of this struggle and should not allow themselves to be dragged down by any retarding influences. They should have faith in God and fight against the injuries and shames inflicted by the world. In *The Innocents* again, faith in God is emphasized through the character of the old mother who is a striking contrast to her daughter. *The Death of a Friar* gives the moral that pious and virtuous people

¹ Proceedings of the British Academy, 1939, p. 414.

² Ibid.

enjoy Heavenly bliss after death, however visionary it may be. The idyl therefore seems to be an indirect plea for pious and virtuous living. In *At Endor*, Abercrombie expresses his philosophic view that witches who are symbols of evil, have no power over good men. So, this poem is also an indirect plea for virtuous living. Abercrombie probably intends *In The Dunes* to be a representation of the various aspects of the Sea which are really the moods of man. The symbolism in *The Olympians* is obscure but the main philosophy is that the infinite should be imprisoned in the finite. One should proceed from the finite to the infinite and bring back the infinite into the finite. In other words, it is a happy blend of the two basic principles for which the Olympians and Bacchus stand. The significance of the revival of Zagreus is that in course of time men shall realise that a natural life free from the baleful influences of the machine, shall be really a life of joy, for it gives them scope for increasing the beauty of the spirit.

Plays

Not the ruler for me, but the ranker, the tramp of the road,
The slave with the sack on his shoulders pricked on with the goad,
The man with too weighty a burden, too weary a load.

—*John Masefield*

Abercrombie as a poet presents a philosophic and poetic view of life; but as a playwright he chiefly concerns himself with the delineation of the rustic, his shortcomings, his obsessions, his compensations, in short, his actual life and thought. Rowan Williams observes that Abercrombie has specialised “in a type of allusive and symbolic drama with rustic characters and background, rather resembling a dramatised parable.”¹ In this chapter, the four short plays published in 1922: namely “The Adder”, “The Staircase”, “The Deserter” and “The End of the World”, and two three-act plays, namely, “Deborah” (1913) and “Phoenix” (1923), are studied in detail. All his plays, excepting “The Sale of Saint Thomas” (which has been discussed in a previous chapter), are highly illustrative of an important tendency of the modern drama to which Synge in Ireland and Masefield in England gave a strong lead, of creating great drama from the simple material of folk-life.² Abercrombie’s drama may be called ‘tragedie bourgeoise’; but this has registered an advance on the 18th century drama—the domestic plays of Lillo and Moore—by treating of the common man, the rustic man. It is with the joys and sorrows of this neglected piece of humanity that Abercrombie is primarily concerned. The democratic temperament seems to be predominant in him and he is one in this with Masefield, Cannan, Gibson, Gordon,

¹ Camillo Pellizzi—English Drama(translated by Rowan Williams), p.193.

² A.E. Morgan—Tendencies of Modern English Drama, p. 301.

Bottomley, Drinkwater and others. Abercrombie works the same lode and yet differs widely from them, and from Bottemley in particular. Abercrombie invests his work with a realism, and the latter with remoteness which carries us far from actuality.

Mrs. Catherine Abercrombie tells me that all his plays were produced on the stage at different dates,¹ with some effect, but it cannot be said with great success. "The End of the World" was produced by Miss Muriel Platt at Bristol in April 1914; by John Drinkwater at Birmingham Repertory Theatre in 1915; and by Jackson Wilcox at the Playhouse, Liverpool, in 1920. "The Staircase" was produced once in December 1914, and again in 1920 by Jackson Wilcox along with "The End of the World", "The Adder" was produced in 1913 by Basil Dean at the Liverpool Repertory Theatre, and by John Drinkwater at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. "The Deserter" was also produced at the Leeds Arts Theatre (192-?) and "Phoenix" in St. Martin's Theatre, in 1923.

The aim of this chapter is to approach Abercrombie's plays from the point of view of certain problems he raises. He only presents them and does not attempt to solve them. He introduces characters of rustic life and they are certainly "a relief from the stylised heroes of much early twentieth-century poetic drama."²

i. The Adder

In "The Adder" we have an eccentric character, a charcoal-burner by trade, a rake that goes on sinning 'till the blood was tired in him'. Then he becomes a methodist, abjures beer and tobacco and believes that all his sins are forgiven. But in the process of this strange reformation, his wits seem to have been dazed, as his friend Newby puts it, by the preaching of a shallow, showy Methodist-minister, a Mr. Startup. Obviously owing to this muddleheaded gospeller, Seth, the charcoal burner, falls a victim to strange beliefs, superstitious fears, grotesque illusions and absurd prac-

¹ Personal letter, dated 5 March 1945.

² Ernest Reynolds—Modern English Drama, p. 83.

tices. He believes that all his sins have been bodily transferred to an adder which he keeps in a box and he nourishes it in his mind, nay, worships it! Another unfortunate obsession that presses sorely on him is that the whole pack of sins, fed by him formerly upon flesh they tasted and liked so well, are now clamouring for the flesh that is his daughter, his only daughter begotten in sin during the full flood of his wicked career. His sister, however, has taken his daughter into her protection and brings her up in strict seclusion and gross ignorance, away from the cheerful haunt of happy human faces. As long as his sister is alive and his daughter lives with her, he is confident that his daughter is safe from the corroding influences of the world. But when his sister dies and the daughter comes home to live with him, his one care, his greatest anxiety is how to keep her from coming into sinful contact with a squire of his acquaintance, for he has grave doubts about his daughter's morals. He has already seen her playing once in the little orchard near the home; he has also watched, keeping himself unseen, the girl's young play, her joyous skippings, her childish reels. All this he has beheld with poison in his brain—

“How could I tell, whether her wanton games,
Her merry tiptoe gait, were not in truth
Vile words prettily spoken?”¹

Now his worst fears are realised. A dramatic conflict arises in him with the coming of the daughter.² Newby, his familiar friend, is a simple unsophisticated man, who knows how to enjoy his pipe and his beer. His wits are not dazed by the efforts of a crazy preacher like Mr. Startup. When this plain-spoken man happens to see the girl, he inquires in a half-playful manner if that be the girl who has never heard of the devil. On this, the father becomes alarmed and threatens to kill Newby if he stays there any longer, for he is ‘old wickedness itself’. From this, the girl instinctively understands that the old man must be a wicked man, whatever ‘wicked’ may mean, and therefore different from her father; else argues the girl, why should her father ask the old man, Newby, to go

¹ *Poems*, p. 371.

² Priscilla Thouless—*Modern Poetic Drama*, p. 69.

away? When she is told that he is wicked, she says she would know from him something she wanted. The crisis the father has feared is now reached. He demands from his daughter her meaning. The girl replies that she does not clearly know what her meaning is. She answers, referring to flowers grown in a cellar, thus :

“How can they know there a sun outside?
Yet the pale leaves they have, show they can tell
They’re cheated out of something. So am I!
I’m cheated. There is a brave colour growing somewhere
And I know naught of it, but that my life
Has been shut off from it, somehow. Father, sins
Are scarlet, are they not?”¹

Now the author takes us into the holy precincts of the child mind, where we get a peep into its mysterious workings, into the glories of the irrepressible budding human personality. “There is a brave colour growing somewhere”—what is the colour she asks, the colour of a patch on the back of a beggar woman’s cloak she chanced to see, a colour that touched her soul? Once she heard her aunt muttering to herself ‘our sins are scarlet’. The girl knows that fire is scarlet. So she argues, that sin like fire should be a power, and like the hue of the scarlet patch on the poor cloak of the beggar woman, a pride. Thus what the father attempted to conceal from her, takes strong hold of her imagination, her whole being, and she wants her father to tell her the thing her aunt spoke of. But the obsessed father’s only answer to the seemingly obstinate questionings is to push her inside the hut.

Presently, the squire, the object of the father’s worst fears, comes, ridiculing Seth for his reformed ways. For says he, “however sadly changed, what you were, you are ; and so we are equals. Lechery is the one thing that makes men equal”. The squire honestly asks Seth if his religion is worth to him more than his own lechery to him ? He calls both of them a misery—one cannot help believing that to the unfortunate charcoal-burner, his religion proved only a misery. Then the talk turns to his daughter and in his anxiety the charcoal-burner lies terribly :

¹ Poems, p. 374.

he has no daughter; if he has one she is with his sister. So, once again the squire begins to ridicule Seth:

“What’s this thin vinegar that is in you now,
The cracks of you caulked with charitable clay,
That makes you dare be proud above me,—me
Brimmed with the ancient vintage I have kept
Faithfully mellowing, till I am soaked through
With the power of it, with the scarlet fire of it?”¹

As soon as this word ‘scarlet’ is uttered, the girl within happens to hear it, and she comes out of the house. The squire casts lustful glances at her and asks her if she is not the daughter of his friend Seth and of his wickedness, ‘that should make her full of sin as a bee-hive is full of honey!’ The girl frankly confesses that she does not know what sin is but that there is something in her struggling for freedom. She asks him to help her in learning about sin. She has heard him say ‘scarlet, and there must be something in him he felt like scarlet. Might it not be sin? She must be told what sin is. But the squire is evidently taken aback by the too favourable turn of events. For the present, he puts off the girl with a promise to help her to find out what sin is, some other day. Now the girl is simply delirious with joy at this promise of the squire, and dances round the stack singing:

“O life of mine, I shall love you yet:
Næ shall be changed, my life and I.
Dancing will no more be a game
Played to pretend we’re hearing a tune.
There will be singing of tunes enough
To make us dance when we know it not:
They’ll be living within us, the tunes,
Water of brooks in spring for happiness,
Scarlet fire for power and pride.”²

Presently, however, the father seizes her by the arm and tells her pointing to the stack that it will burn itself and everything else if it is broken through the sheathing turf and thatch of boughs, and is left open. Similarly, if her own lust be left open, it will burn her too. The girl now asks the father if her

¹ Ibid, p. 378.

² Ibid, p. 379.

heart were stored with much glowing flame and declares that if that power lies indeed lodged in her, it should burn to freedom and fill her with the burning. The father now feels he has no argument to advance but still demands a promise from his daughter not to go near the squire, for the latter would treat her friendishly. At this, the long-suppressed but slowly smouldering individuality of the child bursts forth into a sudden blaze of indignant self-assertion and in words that seemed to gather thunder and high gales from her burning lips, she questions her father what right he has to cheat her of a knowledge all folk have and what harm there lies in finding what sin is.

“Father, let’s have this out. What right have you
To cheat me of knowledge all folks have?”¹

But the stupid father knows no better than to ask the girl to stifle sin. He might have asked her to stifle dear life itself! For, to her this word ‘sin’ sounds sweet as life. So the girl tells her father to his face, ‘I mean to find it out.’ At this, the obsessed parent realizes that he has been fighting only with the evil heart inherited from him by his daughter and calls upon God and His Mercy to fight it down in her. And then turning to his daughter, he promises to show her the very spirit of sin and asks her to put her hand into the adder’s box and implores God in whose name he conscientiously commits the blackest sin. He invites the aid of the All-Merciful to put his own innocent child to death for daring to ask for a knowledge of what every other man and woman know in the natural course. Can human perversion go further?

The child puts her hand in the box and is promptly bitten. She cries that she is bitten by some ‘hidden anger’ and instinctively proposes to suck the bite. But the pitiless father says, “no need”, and thus murders her literally in cold blood. How bitter are the fruits of bigotry? Who can set limits to its ravages? Is this not worse than any other conceivable crime? Worse than lechery? The squire who is the very embodiment of lechery may be condoned when compared with his reformed neighbour, Seth, Seth the murderer of his own innocent daughter. If Seth has held the simple faith of his friend Newby and shared with him the opinion, “a child is a child”, and brought her up

¹ Ibid, p. 381.

in the sunny ways of reason and commonsense, instead of devising for her a special mode of life suggested by his own diseased religious perversions, he would have kept his innocent daughter and spared himself the pangs of a deliberate child-murder. Such is the tragedy of bigotry and of ill-digested faith, a faith practised in the holy name of God and Religion, but subserving only the purposes of the devil. The adder is Seth himself, for he cherished in him the dangerous venom of the adder, a frightening blaze that has been fanned by his religious fanaticism.

ii. The Staircase

“The Staircase” is an illustration of the vanity of human wishes or aspirations which end most often in disappointment if realized (as with the women in the play), or regret if they are not realized (as with the Joiner). The Joiner has health, strength and above all, a master-will; but he is living a ‘fooled life’ dreaming of wedding a woman who left her father’s roof years ago to tramp after her runagate lover who (the Joiner erroneously believes) must have tired her sufficiently to make her long for a change. So he quietly enters the home of the girl’s father after the latter’s accidental death and starts repairing the rotten staircase and bringing the house into a fit condition for the ‘new comer’, the old man’s daughter who, he expects, to return some day. Fancy’s wild and wayward child, he is yet at the threshold of life, still living in dreams and hopes. He is yet to be disillusioned by the harsh and bitter realities of life. He dreams that the girl of his fancy would turn up one day and would offer herself to him as his woman and be the first to fly up the stairs he is fitting. His wild dream is wholly dispelled by the girl herself when she returns there, but thoroughly chastened by suffering and disillusioned by experience.

The woman—Abercrombie does not give her a name—comes in ‘tired, worn, and wet, quite drenched to the skin’. She asks the Joiner to allow her to sit by his hearth, and soon enters into a sprightly conversation with him without any hint of the unspeakable agony she suffers within. Is the Joiner framing new stairs? Is it for the girl of his dream? Shall her

feet be the first to get up the stairs?—are her first questions. The Joiner replies that she has guessed right, and then expresses his sympathy for the girl of his fancy, by abusing her father for sending her out of his house. It is true she has misbehaved with one, but, in his opinion, that one has fouled her and left her to trudge after him. He extols her beauty though he has not seen her even once. “There is none in all the land”, says he, “could show this beauty off; but only is lightning matches in the sun.” For all his praises the poor Joiner receives no compliment. On the other hand, the woman asks him what right he has to be so comfortable with his dreams, while she, “the truth of them, went broad awake in agony”. The Joiner assures her, not knowing that she is the girl herself, that he is prepared to do the girl of his fancy all the good a man can think of. Then, she reveals herself to be the girl, the girl of his fancy, only outwardly changed by her life with a tramping labourer for five years. Reduced to utter destitution she only returns to beg of her father a shilling or two. Pride has no longer any place in her. Nay, more! She is now escaping from the law with her husband. None have given them jobs—a tramp and his homeless doxy. Her man has lost his wits and has taken to setting fire to stakes. Once he has burnt a house and with that a child too. She also has a queer time of it with his fists. In spite of all this she is true to him.

At this the poor Joiner’s heart sinks within himself. All his life he has gone hungry for that hour. He would not make dream break its promise to him so nearly kept. He would make her another life. But the woman has already learnt life’s philosophy. Now she is not ‘the sop she had been once.’ She has developed a dry side. She would not risk another dream. The rust of the world has entered into her heart. She has learnt the truth and she would abide by it. She has had her hunger. She has been fed on filthy poison. Her dream, her wishes have been a sore disappointment to her. She has passed under the chastening influence of suffering and truth. For the world’s sake, she would not dream a second time, risk a second fate!

Meanwhile, the Tramp comes in asking for food and threatens the Woman with instant violence. The Joiner offers to

intervene, but is promptly told by the Tramp to stand off and be an Englishman. While the two are preparing to fly at each other, the law officers discover the Tramp and pursue him upstairs. He is caught. The Woman is not sorry either. She even welcomes the way to jail. Probably they would give them food there. The poor Joiner rejoices that his days of darkness are coming to a close, for the Tramp is going to jail, leaving his woman, as he thinks, to his pleasure. But the Woman herself coolly bids the Joiner farewell and thanks him for lending her his fire a while. The Joiner is left to muse over his lot and his staircase. His disillusionment is now complete.

Abercrombie gives a full-length portrait of the Woman. Possessed of the stoutest nature in the world, no combination of adverse circumstances, neither poverty nor distress, neither treachery nor disappointment, neither wickedness nor rudeness could embitter her invincible temper. She does not say one word against the folk who have stirred her father's anger against her. She does not even think ill of her father that turned her out of doors. He is still dear to her. She is also considerate to the lover who attracted her first, abandoned her afterwards, and ever after used her with the greatest brutality. Years of utter poverty and harsh treatment, and that too from the person from whom she expected every joy in life, far from unnerving her and crazing her poor wits, have not even disconcerted her. Even under the most distressing and embarrassing circumstances, her habitual self-possession and natural bright temper, do not fail her. A penniless woman, with hunger gnawing at her soul, with the officers of the law dogging her foot-steps, with her man thoroughly brutalized and utterly void of every vestige of self-respect and altogether dead to all sense of shame and duty, she has still plenty of good spirits left to laugh and to joke, to remonstrate and to philosophize. In her conversation with the Joiner, she gives evidence of depth of humour and richness of imagination which would have done honour to the happiest and most gifted princesses ever born. Her constancy is as amazing as her fortitude. Her will is as enlightened as it is unchanging. It is above all temptation, all sensuality and her iron will is matched only by her imperturbability. Such strength of mind, such serenity of temper even under such distressing cir-

cumstances bespeak a heroism rarely met within human beings, particularly in the lower strata of society. She has a heroic and constant temper. She has a fierce loyalty even to an unworthy lover.

The play thus presents the problem of hope ending in frustration, of circumstances that baffle all human aspirations. We are made to feel that

“There is a divinity that shapes our ends
Rough-hew them how we will”¹

Probably Abercrombie wishes to show through this play that there are faith, courage and heroism, even among ‘the poorest, the lowest and the lost’.

iii. The Deserter

“The Deserter” may be considered as Abercrombie’s study of the problem of ethics in matters of love. It is the story of a soldier’s conscience suddenly awakened, making him turn away with disgust from the woman he loved and for whose sake he had deserted from the army. The tragic figure in the play is the woman Martha. Her husband, Peter, is a drunkard who signs away a number of I. O. Us. and almost owes a book of them to the commercial brute of a Luther. Half-crowns, ten-pound notes and sovereigns are all one to Peter, and whenever he is in need of a fresh loan or when the question of repayment is raised, he asks Luther to keep cool till he is dead, with the understanding that Luther might marry his wife, Martha, after his death. It looks as though Peter agreed to a sort of complete make-over of all his belongings, house, wife and all, after his death, to Luther.

But Martha is in love with a soldier who has joined the army which is about to leave for France in a short time. Now when she learns that the days of her husband are already numbered and that she has no other escape from the clutches of the money-lender, she writes to her lover immediately to return. She even deliberately hastens the death of her husband by allowing him excessive drink. Peter lies dead in one room,

¹ Hamlet — Act V (ii).

when the soldier returns deserting the army and sleeps in an out-house resting after his tiresome journey.

Meanwhile, Luther, the money-lender, turns up and proffers his love to her, which she spurns with contempt. Luther explains to her his claims and her helpless condition and asks her to accept his hand. But Martha would rather 'sup poison and dose herself full of sheep-dip than to go with Luther!' This reply curiously appeals to the degenerate Luther for he cannot 'away with quiet woman!' He is for the 'fire-works.' He has had to his credit the experience of taming his two wives that 'went off in sound respectable diseases both!' Now he is game for a third, and urges Martha to hasten to the Church. Hoping to run away with her lover then sleeping in the out-house, she contrives to postpone the evil hour and sends Luther away for the time being. Her struggle is to protect herself against the violence of Luther. So, she walks into the out-house and finds her soldier just waking from the deep slumber. Martha explains to him her husband's death, Luther's claims and her future plans to go away with him (the soldier).

Now it is clear to the soldier that it is the desperate anxiety of Martha to protect herself against the loathsome breath of Luther and to throw herself into her lover's arms that made her summon him so urgently after deliberately hastening her husband's death. But her behaviour, in hastening the death of her husband wilfully and in hiding it from him in her letter to him, really shocks the soldier, who is at once awakened into a sort of sudden conscientiousness. He hates her for killing her husband by deliberately overdosing him, as it is nothing short of a murder. He regrets having become a deserter, for an unworthy object. The word 'deserter' clearly rings in his ears, and he takes it as a joke that he should decide whether Luther should have her or not. It is Martha herself who should do it. But as far as he is concerned, he resolves to have nothing to do with her. He would rather go on his way.

"I had the choice of being a passable man
Or a swindling sneak-thief lily-livered deserter.

I've chosen as you askt me ; and why not
Go on that way ? It will not harm me now."¹

He does not like to allow the life that Martha belongs to, to touch him. Even for pity's sake, he cannot take her. He leaves her now and becomes a deserter in a double sense. And the play ends with the dull and silent receipt of the symbolic dandelion sent to Martha as a present from Luther.

It cannot be denied that Abercrombie is to some extent influenced by John Drinkwater in the choice of this theme. It is almost the same as that of Drinkwater's play, "The Rebellion", written as early as 1914 and dedicated to Abercrombie and his wife Catherine. Mr. Percy Withers writes that this play was read in Abercrombie's house before its publication and that Abercrombie indeed made a useful contribution to the general discussion that ensued thereon.² But Abercrombie does not merely copy his friend's theme. He develops the theme on quite different lines and presents it as though his play is a sort of rebellion against Drinkwater's "Rebellion". In both plays, an individual deserts from the army for the sake of his love—love which transcends all loyalties. But unlike Drinkwater's deserter, Abercrombie's deserter is overcome by a suddenly awakened conscience in the end, and therefore realizes the folly of his base action and finally deserts the object of his love. But in both plays the problem is one of ethics in matters of love. Drinkwater glorifies love in its naturalistic sense. 'Continental naturalism not only raises love above irrelevant duties, it also releases love from duties towards its objects, vindicates its right to change objects in accordance with its most unreasonable caprices, in short, allows it to develop absolutely freely.'³ But neither Abercrombie nor Drinkwater belongs to the school of continental naturalism, though Drinkwater appears to some extent to defend the theory in his delineation of the characters of Narros and Shuba (the poet and leader of a revolutionary party and his queen) in his play, Narros leaves the army to its fate at the nick of the moment and

¹ Poems, p.416.

² English, Autumn, 1943. p.177.

³ Martin Ellehauge - Striking Figures among Modern English Dramatists, p.79.

embraces Shuba's favour. Thus Narros frees love from duty and when a captain objects :

"You are sworn,"

Narros retorts :

"Light things are lightly sworn

Yet did I swear not. Albeit had I sworn

I would forswear it now."¹

Thus Drinkwater exonerates such feelings as those of Narros in "Rebellion" and in "Mary Stuart" also. This is certainly akin to the tendencies of continental naturalism, though in fact, it is said, he has attacked the theory.² But Abercrombie does not give any scope for such misunderstanding. His deserter is a person with qualms of conscience. He departs from his duty as a soldier but soon realises the folly of it. The problem of ethics soon presents itself in all its entirety to him when he easily sees the unworthiness of the object of his love. He quickly perceives his action to be a grave error, in the light of what he is to get, a filthy object, a murderess and woman of proved faithlessness. So, he deserts her. Abercrombie seems to have no sympathy for her, for she is left to disappointment in the end. Drinkwater, on the other hand, seems to coolly accept the action of Shuba, the queen, even though she has forsaken her husband and his kingdom, in the name of love.

iv. The End of the World

Human values begin to change in the light of circumstances. How they change is an interesting study. In "The End of the World", a serio-comic short play, Abercrombie takes for his theme the humorous reactions of a village-folk to a sudden belief that the world is going to end. Charles Williams, a poet and critic of recent times, calls it "an ironical presentation of a number of remote villagers overcome by the rumour and conviction that the world is about to be struck by a comet!"³ Llewellyn Jones aptly calls this 'a comedy of

¹ John Drinkwater - *The Rebellion*, Act II (i), p.35.

² Martin Ellehauge - *Striking Figures among Modern English Dramatists*, p.79.

³ Charles Williams - *Poetry at Present*, p.153.

transvaluation of values.’¹ This transvaluation of values is the most natural result of certain circumstances.

Abercrombie chooses as many as eight persons for this play, besides several men and women of the village. It is quite a large number for the author. Huff the farmer, Sollers the wain wright, Merrick the smith, Vine the publican, Shale the labourer, Warp the mole-catcher, and Mrs Huff are his *dramatis personae*. They spend their time in a public-house in drinking, in gossiping, in listening to tunes and in eagerly receiving news from wandering travellers. To such a band of rollicking rustics, the dowsers whose profession is to divine hidden waters, goes there with a view “to be alone and quiet in his thoughts”; but finds none of it. When asked for news, he breaks the news of a comet which he considers to be a foreboding of evil of fire, fear and unbelievable death. The people are slowly and gradually startled to reactions when Vine the publican goes out, scatters the news and finally rouses a crowd of men and women who actually burst in and shout confusedly that the comet is moving, that its tail is wagging and that it is leaping like a cat on a bird. They are all the more convinced when they look at the flaming colour of the horizon, not knowing that it is due to a haystack on fire. The people say and do things, and as Charles Williams aptly puts it, ‘we do not know the end till the end’.² The whole farce of “The End of the World” is over when Warp, the mole-catcher, returns after a long travel and explains to the other village-folk that dowsers live on lies and that it is only a rick on fire that has confirmed their foolish fears in them about the comet and caused also so much confusion among them that the so-called end would come that very night, after that oven-day.

But as has been already pointed out, the play is of interest in that it is a ‘comedy of transvaluation of values.’ The values of life according to Huff and Shale change after the sudden or slow belief into which they are worked. Huff, formerly a self-righteous farmer who feels that he has been standing before his wife’s wickedness in the light of her adultery with Shale, now changes his views. Before this sudden reaction, his was ‘a tough

¹ Llewellyn Jones – *First Impressions*, p. 158.

² C. Williams – *Poetry at Present*, p. 153.

brain to pore on sin and not go mad.' This is illustrated in the conversation between Merrick and Huff when the dowser is about to break the monstrous and dreadful news that rouse the men in the other villages also.

He is not, however, quite willing to believe the dowser in the beginning, but suddenly works himself into the belief that the comet is going to end the world, simply to feed his patient heart by taking its wages in the punishment of his wife and Shale through that divine work of devastation! He thinks that the visit of a comet is definitely planned by God to punish those two sinners. He believes it to be imminent as he tells Merrick the smith :

"How should I not believe a thing
That calls aloud on my mind and spirit and they
Answer to it like starving conquering soldiers
Told to break out and loot?"¹

But when the hour comes he fancies himself to be looking on delighted at witnessing their punishment 'like a nobleman who sees his horse winning an easy race.' When a crowd of men and women shout confusedly outside, he even visualizes how it begins, the just man's reward. But this attitude in Huff does not last long. He begins to brood over his so-called 'good life' that has denied him all pleasures :

"A caterpillar munching a cabbage-heart,
Always drudging further and further from
The sounds and lights of the world, never abroad
Nor flying free in warmth and air sweet-smelling :
A crawling caterpillar, eating his life
In a deafo dark – that's my gain of goodness!"²

So he repents now for not having taken advantage of his life. He wishes to see again the lascivious sight of Droitwich women, he had seen some time back in his life. He feels himself 'like a bird that flies cannot see the flight it takes' and begins to recognise the stirring sense the enemy Shale has! There is also some reaction in Shale, the labourer. He is the type of an easy-going man. He is a good talker and expert in the art of 'practising on women with his eyes.' He lures Mrs. Huff not

¹ Poems, p. 432.

² Ibid, p. 440.

only with his looks but also with his words. He runs away with her and justifies his action by saying 'Love is the thing and love makes the wrong go right'! He does not care to have any faith in the rumour that takes wing and laughs at 'the burbling, simmering and bumpy boiling women', mobbed together under the witan trees, making a scandal of the flying star. But all this soon changes when the reaction sets to work in him. After second thoughts, he hands over Mrs. Huff to her husband though not exactly out of fear, but out of a sort of prudence – rather not to be 'in the risk of keeping her', at the final moment! But this prudent reaction is only short-lived in him for when the whole farce is over, when the truth of a burning rick is revealed, he wants back his woman and suggests to her if they can be off for home!

It is only Mrs. Huff in whom we find no reaction to this sudden belief, but only reaction to the reactions of others. The change of attitude both in Huff and Shale enables her to understand their characters more thoroughly and hence she rejects them both.

The other figures in the play are minor characters. The character of the dowser is interesting. He is an enigma. The mole-catcher says: 'he lives on lies'. He himself admits in one context, that 'it is a trick to rouse the world.' But he is neither mad as Huff at first thinks him to be, nor a liar with a wicked kind of pleasure in tricks of this kind. He is quite a sensible man with a firm and sincere conviction, though meaningless, of the impending catastrophe. The reaction in him to the sudden belief is to land him in a web of pessimistic philosophical speculations. His musings are indeed admirable poetry:

“Life, the mother who lets her children play
So seriously busy, trade and craft,
Life with her skill of a million years' perfection
To make her heart's delighted glorying
Of sunlight, and of clouds about the moon,
Spring lighting her daffodils, and corn
Ripening gold to ruddy, and giant seas,
And mountains sitting in their purple clothes –
O life I am thinking of, life the wonder.

All blotcht out by a brutal thrust of fire
Like a midge that a clumsy thumb squashes and smears."¹

When all go out and join the crowd outside and when he is alone, he bursts into a grand soliloquy which to a great extent helps us to exonerate the dowser from a charge that a hasty reader is liable to make that it might be he that set the fire to Huff's haystack! This passage is also a revelation of his reaction, a turn for Philosophising:

"Life that has done such wonders with its thinking,
And never daunted in imagining;
That has put on the sun and the shining night,
The flowering of the earth and tides of the sea,
And irresistible rage of fate itself,
All these as garments for its spirit's journey—
O now this life, in the brute chance of things,
Murder'd, uselessly murderd."²

The other characters evince little interest from this point of view. On the whole, the play is treated with a light hand to produce a comic effect. Abercrombie seizes the problem of transvaluation of values and incidentally presents life—the real rustic life in its true aspects. Speaking of the conclusion of the play, Thouless says that it is rather flat, after the poetic devastation which the dowser has created.³ But Charles Williams seems to have been acquainted with this charge, for his criticism seems to be a carefully worded answer to it. He says that Abercrombie has given in his play such an equal poetic effect what the poem or a novel, if Hardy had written it, would have given and that the end of the play is of poetic and not intellectual intensity.⁴ The end is the revelation of the farce and Mrs. Huff's rejection of both of those 'cur-dogs', Huff and Shale, who run after the dowser to give him a good handling. And as in the words of Miss Thouless "it reminds one of the comedy of early English plays of Heywood and his Merry Pardoner."⁵ But, according to an article written on

¹ Ibid, p. 429.

² Ibid, p. 434.

³ Priscilla Thouless – Modern Poetic Drama, p. 71.

⁴ C. Williams – Poetry at present, p. 153.

⁵ Priscilla Thouless – Modern Poetic Drama, p. 72.

Abercrombie, the poet has developed his theme mechanically and he is determined above all things not to be sentimental. "Not one of his rustics shall show a glimmer of decent feeling, and they too become rigid in their conventional baseness. The life given to them at first by the author's command of racy and pithy speech dies out of them until they all seem puppets condemned to dance for ever the same ignominious dance to the cold laughter of his audience."¹

In this connection it is interesting to note by way of contrast what Alice Meynell has said of Abercrombie's rustics figuring in this play :

In all his rustics he will recognize an obscure strength of imagination : the implicit imagination of all mankind in one man who remembers his own love of life as a boy ; the imagination of a married rustic in another who, convinced of the near destruction of the world by a comet, looks forward to telling his diseased wife that he had the luck to see the monstrous things and the earth on fire. (And who has not observed the husband who knows no eagerness like the eagerness to astonish his wife with news? It is the ruling impulse of the married man.) In yet another of the little company all anticipation is absorbed by the hope of one satisfying sight—the agony of the two who have injured him ; and one man weeps vaguely for love of the beautiful moon, to be put out for ever. And in all these speakers of English there is no seed of the love of moral good. Will the Calabrian village, peopled, according to our journalists, with "savages", or will any little Malay island town, under the terror of some alien Mohammedan tyrant, or will the huts of cowering Sudanese, show seven men thus incapable of the love of God? Into the grotesque mouths of these English villagers the genius of a most notable poet has put the utterance of what imagination he has found possible to assign to them, and it is a conjecture that brings the reader dismay ! " ²

Sometimes, we are tempted to agree with D. H. Lawrence who hates and detests Abercrombie's 'ridiculous imitation Yokels and all the silly hash of his bucolics' and wonder along

¹ The Living Age, p. 376.

² Dublin Review—October 1915.

with him "Why, why, in God's name, is Abercrombie messing about with Yokels and Cider and runaway wives."¹ But, the answer is that it is a characteristic of Abercrombie to assign imaginative and poetic perceptions to rustics and the question of propriety does not arise so long as they are poetic. Mr. Lawrence cannot excuse himself from the charge, as he has himself dealt with such characters.

v. Deborah

Deborah (1913) is one of the longer plays of Abercrombie. It stands in striking contrast with his other longer play, Phoenix (1923). Ernest Reynolds remarks "Deborah opens with a tragedy of a fishing community stuck down by cholera. There is a powerful prelude, but the long lapse of time supposed to take place between it and Act II, when the child of the first scene has become a man, destroys the continuity of interest. The last act is a welter of storms, shipwreck and hysteria."² But the interest of the play is in that it is the tragedy of the strivings of a rustic woman to stand and shape life in the light of adverse circumstances that are not within her control. Through the daft woman in "Deborah", Abercrombie presents some views of weak fatalism. But one thing must be remembered. Abercrombie puts all these ideas in the mouth of a mad woman and it is highly significant. Whether there be some power of some unknown and irresistible force, be it Fate or any other thing, men cannot dispense with action altogether, giving themselves up to melancholia or blindly submitting themselves to weak fatalism. What should one do when beset with worries and difficulties? Should one try to fight against the odds in life one comes across, or should one submit oneself in a mood of despondency and utter helplessness? What should be the aims of such an one frustrated and crippled and brought low by the inexorable and adverse circumstances? This seems to be the problem of Abercrombie which prompted the writing of "Deborah"—a tragedy in three acts, and Abercrombie therein emphasizes the necessity of human effort.

¹ D. H. Lawrence—*Select Literary Criticism*, p. 82.

² Ernest Reynolds—*Modern English Drama*, pp. 83-84.

As the title suggests, the play centres round Deborah, a fisherwoman in her twenties with three distinct stages of mental make-up corresponding to the three vicissitudes of her life. She is a native of a tidal island and she cherishes highly noble ideas regarding love and life. She considers her love for David pure and sacred :

“For there is wondrous more than the joy of life,
In lovers; there’s in them God himself
Taking great joy to love the life He made :

We are God’s desires more than our own, we lovers.”¹

Deborah’s aim is to live in such a godhead of love by marrying David and to have children by him, ‘that still sleep within their love’. But that cannot be. There breaks out an epidemic—an epidemic as fierce as the one in the History of the Peloponnesian War.² It rages so furiously in her marshy village that many people including not only her lover David, but also Barnaby, the son of a strong fisherman Saul, are attacked by the disease. The villagers are utterly defenceless and they wait indefinitely for the coming of a doctor whom Saul takes by force into his house immediately after his landing to attend first on his only son. Even when the boy gets better, Saul does not allow the doctor to attend on others! Deborah being practical-minded, leaves her husband and goes to Saul but pleads in vain with him to let the doctor attend on her lover David. Saul is stubborn and the delay kills David. With this, her aim of marrying him is frustrated. She is all vengeance and rushes to Saul’s house with an axe but only to find him already dead of the pestilence. Necessarily life has lost its charm for such a woman as Deborah. She would have gladly died but for the compassion she feels for Barnaby. He is left alone to the rage of vengeful neighbours who are deprived, on his account, of the services of the doctor. She explains the change in her attitude thus :

“And then I saw
You village folk meaning to turn your grief
To malice put on that young helpless boy,
Barnaby. I stopt that; and, to be true,

¹ Poems, p. 465.

² C. Foster Smith (Tr.)—Thucydides, pp. 245–54.

Then I knew nothing why I gave the lad
 My hearth. Blindly I did it; but it was
 The life in me desiring joy again,
 And, unknown to itself making a way
 Out of sorrow."¹

Now begins the second phase of life of Deborah when her chief concern is what life can do against its sorrow. A student of psychology will explain this fortitude of hers as a process of sublimation. She tries to find pleasure in spite of her present sorrow, in her deliberate attempt to shape the life of Barnaby whom she now adopts. But this also fails! Barnaby comes of age and with his age grows his ambition. He loves Miriam, David's sister; and in the idea of their union Deborah finds pleasure. David's mother is against it, and she even curses Deborah for encouraging it and Miriam for foolishly loving a lad who has been responsible for her brother's death. Deborah warns Miriam's mother in a manner which reveals the poet's attitude towards life in general:

"I'll warn you, not to risk
 What scant frail happiness you have, in hope
 To match your will against the power of life
 When it means making glory or love again."²

But the mother is not the real obstacle to their happy marriage. Barnaby is himself to blame! When Miriam is with child, he ignores his intimacies with her, considers them foolish and trivial and wishes to go to the seas. The girl holds their union sacred and objects to his going. The following short conversation between them, just at the time of his quitting, reveals the insincerity of his love and Miriam's calm resignation to her fate:

Barnaby:

Leave that,
 And tell me. Is there ought like to come of it?
 Miriam:

And if there was, what would it mean to you?
 Barnaby:

Why—why, I think—I should come back to you.

¹ *Poems*, p. 476.

² *Ibid*, p. 478.

Miriam :

You may go with an easy mind then. No,
There's nothing like to come of it—nothing.¹

Barnaby goes. Deborah has so far longed to live only to look at their happiness as wife and husband. Now her hopes are completely shattered. This is due to the inexplicable workings of 'something stronger than life'.

But Deborah is not the sort of woman that easily loses heart. She is neither the Desdemona type of simplicity nor the Portia type of romanticism, but she is an unparalleled example of fortitude and adjustment, rare in modern women. She sublimates her sorrow into service. Miriam is refused shelter in her mother's house. But, kind Deborah takes her into her protection. Now Deborah's difficulties begin to multiply. Miriam gives birth to a dead child and her health is completely shattered. Barnaby's indifference and departure, the birth of a still-born babe, and the midwife's foolish story of Gabriel hounds, and the stormy winds outside, completely upset Miriam mentally and she begins to rave deliriously. Just then Barnaby returns, he, too, mentally shattered, after a painful experience in a ship and seeking shelter under Deborah's roof. A kind of ease, no doubt, makes way into her heart, but she cannot give shelter to him for that stormy dreadful night, in the interests of the delirious Miriam. But as both Barnaby and Miriam are shattered (physically and mentally), they rave alternately. Deborah urges Barnaby to quit, but he will not go out and brave the terrible winds again. Meanwhile Miriam rushes out, releasing herself from the grip of the mid-wife and even that of Deborah and fearlessly runs into the marsh at that late hour of the night. Deborah pursues her into the marshes with a view to rescue her. The tragedy is intensified with the disappearance of the two women, probably both Deborah and Miriam are stifled in the mire!

Thus the play reveals Abercrombie's views regarding human struggle. The fisherwoman stands for a type of woman with high practical-mindedness and fixed notions of duty and adjustment even in hostile circumstances. Her motto is not to risk 'the scant frail happiness in the hopes of life'. This is itself the

¹ Ibid, p. 484.

poet's message to the world and this is the secret of human struggle, be it successful or not.

We do not find in Deborah any weakness or pessimistic gloom as in Hardy's women. Hardy seems to have a different but definite notion, concerning women. He is, for example, no feminist, advocating liberal treatment of women in society. It is almost an instinct with him that woman is the weaker vessel. He is obsessed with the notion that ever since Eve's temptation by the serpent in Paradise, every one of her daughters is weak. He credits her with no more active principle in life than the biological function of perpetuating the species. He would even go to the extent of laying down that it is the woman that tempts man keeping up the old Eve-and-Adam tradition. Bathsheba Everdene or Tess of the D'Urbervilles or any of his heroines may be taken. The story is the same. She sees an attractive young man and is drawn to him. Then one or two more men cross the horizon of her emotional life and she is drawn to them too. She yields or nearly errs, going the way of all flesh. And if it is a comedy, the heroine quietly settles down with a certain Farmer Oak for her husband! If it is a tragedy, the heroine's life is sacrificed at the altar of retribution. Thus Hardy's visions of life are coloured by the notion that woman is essentially weak.

But Abercrombie presents the other side of the picture. According to him, a woman is not at all weaker vessel. Though Fate hangs like an ominous cloud over his woman characters, though in their lives something crops up to dash their cups of happiness, still, they stand and fight and justify their existence. Abercrombie's Deborah is neither weak nor pessimistic. She is a genuine type of woman with everything that is human in her. Though placed in the iron grip of circumstances, she fights a way out of sorrow, never risking the frail happiness of life. Abercrombie thinks that life is after all worth fighting out in spite of its sorrows. At times worse calamities may befall individuals. But these ills should not be allowed to sit like nightmares on man's minds. Truly life is of a mingled yarn, the good and the bad together. Enduring courage, adjustment to environment, quick decision, practical wisdom, are the essentials that one should have, to fight out one's life's

battle, bravely, unmindful of the results. Thus Abercrombie's "own creed was to be far removed from Hardy's conception of the blind Imminent will which propels but does not guide mankind."¹

vi. Phoenix

Abercrombie returns to the more conventional poetic atmosphere of ancient Greece, in his play, *Phoenix*. This is an important play because "in it the mawkish heroics of Pseudo-classic romantic drama have given way to a naturalistic verse dialogue."² "*Phoenix*" (1923) dedicated to Mr. John Drinkwater, is the last of Abercrombie's plays and for it he chooses a theme as antique as the days of the Trojan War. The play deals with the question of sexual love. Unfortunately, in the story, a father and son come into conflict. The play is based upon an old story narrated by the old Phoenix to his ward, Achilles.³

Abercrombie transforms the story, in his own way. According to Homer, Phoenix knew what he was doing, while according to Abercrombie, he was innocent and unaware of the jealous ministrations of his mother. Upon this point, Abercrombie's drama turns. This play is obviously a study on a small scale of a few types of sexual passion or sexual love. At least three types of love are distinguishable here. The first is highly ridiculous or grotesque, being entirely unreal; the second a type merely sexual and playful; while the third emotional and ecstatic or even romantic.

The king is old but sensual. He is not content with his old queen. So he buys from the Sidonian pirates a young and beautiful girl, by name Rhodope, with whom he hopes to live in a new heaven. He imagines the girl to be a dream and himself the dreamer brought together by love itself. Thus "his passion is not merely that of an old sensualist, it is a rebirth of romance."⁴

¹ Proceeding of the British Academy, 1939, p. 399.

² Ernest Reynolds—*Modern English Drama*, p. 84.

³ Homer—*The Iliad* (Translated by A.T. Murray) p. 415.

⁴ D. Bush—*Mythology and Romantic Tradition in English Poetry*, p. 431.

But the old king's passion for the girl is a mere 'trick of imagination'—not firm in the blood. All his talk about love is no more than moonshine ; for he himself says that "it is an effortless lucid ecstasy of imagination". Such a kind of love must be highly disgusting to the onlookers or readers on the one hand, no less than to its object on the other.

To the girl the king is nothing but 'kloat and talk'. Old women sort with him better. She simply loathes him with his bushes of hair in his nostrils and ears. The king's passion is an old man's mumbling lust, a thing laughably obscene, as the prince calls it. The king therefore simply makes a fool of himself in the eyes of one and all. And such a love has generally a tragic ending, tragic alike to the lover, the person loved and others besides. The queen's words may be quoted here in this connection. She sermonises to the king thus :

"Always your truth
Was what you wanted, never what must be ;
And always your truth lie.—Bruised old fellow !
Desolate as an urchin when his friend
Has pusht him down and run off with his toy
And left him grieving !"¹

Rhodope, the slave girl, is the second type. To her, sexual passion is avowedly "mere play". She asks : "Must there be all this flustering work about the simplest easiest pleasure in the world ?" She regrets very much that men will take everything serious. She makes no difference between father and son, prince and soldier, so far as sexual gratification is concerned. The prince is welcome to her because he is a tall young man with a nose as straight as that of a goat. The soldier is welcome to her because of his brawny arms. In fact, she takes nothing seriously. Life itself seems to be a play to her. She asks in real earnest why the men that love her cannot be like her. Men or women with such a bent of mind cannot be trusted in any situation. The girl is ready to be bought, ready to be enjoyed, ready to be sold ! But she prefers a soldier to an old king. She has stirred up the passions of the king, the prince and the soldiers. That is why Charles Williams regards the play as a study of "the shock of the actual world breaking

¹ *Poems*, p. 533.

in on a group of romantics—the world here being represented by one of the most admirable ‘wantons’ (as the Elizabethans would have called her) in modern verse.”¹ She is a typical example of non-nobility or non-morality (not in the sense opposed to nobility or morality, but not concerned with either). She is so frank that neither ignobility nor immorality have any meaning to her. She cannot willingly accept either the king’s highly romantic rhapsodies, or the equally romantic and less sexual love of the prince. She prefers soldiers that take sex normally like animals. The soldiers’ passion also sits highly on them. With them too, as with the girl, it is nothing but play, mere touch and go. They, too, do not take it seriously. Perhaps they are all placed on the same unintellectual and non-ethical level of human society.

The third type of love is that of the prince. It is love’s first flash in youth,—a will to be life that blends with life. That is love sublime, ecstatic and so sweet that it asks for tears. This is the type of love after which every one yearns at one time or other of his or her life in the mid-May of youth. Unaware that Rhodope was a bought slave-girl, the prince seizes her arm in his and feels no wish in him left but to be life that blends with her as sound chimes into sound. Rhodope feels chilled and wishes to be taken indoors. While moving forward with arms round each other’s waist, they suddenly come upon the king who is amazed to see his girl in the arms of his son. He threatens him with whipping for his guilt, and finding it to be of no use, for Phoenix would consider it as ‘the insolence of old lechery’, the king argues in earnest that his son could find plenty of other girls to love, and therefore leave the girl to him, the old king. To all this entreaty, the prince curtly replies that the king cannot have her, for he cannot become young again. The relationship between the two, the father and the son, is forgotten by both. They are now swayed by rare blind passion. They talk as man to man.

In his passionate love for the girl, the prince even accuses his father with the words :

“how there have been
Fathers who’ve set their smooth ingenious lusts

¹ Charles Williams—Poetry at present, p. 160.

To plunder with a relish their own sons
Deliciously.”¹

The prince even draws his sword, being beside himself with anger, when the queen interferes, and admits that she alone has planned this whole thing, “coaxed the whole event into her pattern”. The prince is disillusioned and “the plot unfolds the three terrible discoveries, made by Phoenix; of his filial impiety, of his mother’s treachery in keeping him in the dark, and of the character of his mistress.”²

He now knows that Rhodope has been a girl bought by his father and that his mother has set him purposely against his father in her own selfish interest. Naturally he becomes an embittered man. Phoenix, of course, has to his credit the killing a lion at a single blow, without any assistance even in the first hunting expedition, but has not indeed much of commonsense. He has been ignorant that the woman with whom his father is infatuated is a slave-girl. He is unable to realise quickly that he has been encouraged by the Queen (who is intent on keeping her rights and status) to woo and snatch the slave-girl from his father. But when he finds out the whole mischief, he cries out in anguish:

“I sold my heart! How can such heavenly light
Live on the lying wantonness of women?”³

And, when he knows fully the ways of the bought woman with definite though simple notions of her own, ridiculing the others for taking everything seriously; he does not blame her but bids her farewell. He is changed. The right type of love for him, the kind of life he has found when he returns from hunting, is now killed. So he leaves his mother and thus pays her for her stratagem. It is no wound for him to close in a callous scar: He is sick of the lying wantonness of women. So he takes his exit.

The queen’s case is not love at all, but to put it in Tennyson’s language, ‘jealousy in love’, if not ‘dead love’s harsh hair’—jealous pride! When her husband brings home the bought girl Rhodope, she is overcome by this passionate

¹ Poems, p. 530.

² Proceedings of the British Academy, 1939, p. 412.

³ Poems, p. 544.

feeling of jealous pride, coaxes her husband to arrange a feast to honour her son's adventure, brings the prince and the girl together by asking the girl to spend most of her time with him and by bidding her son, the prince, not to be a startled hobbledehoy but face the girl's looks bravely. In short, she cunningly instigates him to snatch the slave-girl. It costs her dearly, no less than the company and comfort of an only son.

Now, we are in a position to appreciate the remark of Llewellyn Jones that the play is 'a study of nobility, ignobility and a simple natural sort of non-nobility that is not ignoble',¹ as we have become familiar with all the types of characters in the play and their views of love. We are also in a position to reject the criticism of Priscilla Thouless who characterises the figures as "repellent, without reserves which gave the life a little dignity",² for we cannot expect anything more from characters whom Jones would call 'non-noble'. But there is one important point that Miss Thouless correctly raises in that short critical note on Abercrombie's 'Phoenix', namely, that the play is of interest to us for the problem it raises—the problem of adjustment of the ageing and the young in matters of sexual love. The problem may be viewed from another angle as that of adjustment of a young woman and an old man in matters of sexual love. Abercrombie has solved the latter problem definitely for he puts in the mouth of Rhodope who says that such adjustment is impossible:

"Will I have his old knuckles fumbling me?
Give him old women: they'll be glad of him,
But I'll not hold him up clinging against me
With bushes in his nostrils and his ears."³

So, the problem stated here may also be viewed as not merely a study of some attitudes towards love, not merely a study of several aspects of nobility, but also as the general problem of sex. Abercrombie does not offer any solution to the problem, nor does he prescribe rules for the conduct of either the parent or the son in matters of such conflicting love. He is silent over

¹ Llewellyn Jones—First Impressions, p. 159.

² Priscilla Thouless—Modern Poetic Drama, p. 75.

³ Poems, p. 531.

it, simply by sending away the son in anguish from the scene of conflict. The comedy lies in the selling of the slave-girl again, after the prince is gone, forgiving her foolish ways, and whipping one soldier for the amusement of the king.

The Man Behind the Poet

The book is nothing but the expression of the man. The book is nothing but the man trying to talk to you, trying to impart to you some of his feelings. An experienced student will divine the man from the book, will understand the man by the book, as is of course logically proper.

— *Arnold Bennett*

Every artist reveals his personality to some extent or other in his works. But the reader should know how to read it from his works. Poetic personality, according to Abercrombie himself, is the creation, in the poet's works, of the figure of his own personal life.¹ All the same, we know: "the poet is severely limited in the means of his art; he works, moreover, under the strict self-imposed conditions of his artistic purpose; and yet he compels us to imagine a series of thoughts, feelings, actions, in such a way that an individual person, and an apparently independent person, comes into life within them, as convincingly as if he had actually lived before us with all the freedom and infinite subtlety of real acquaintance."² Now we are in a position, having studied Abercrombie's poems, to enter sympathetically into his thought and feeling and trace out his poetic personality. We have become familiar with 'his character and outlook, his strength and weakness, his very accent', as his collected poems are placed before us to live in all the potency of his individuality. So, our present endeavour shall be to trace out the masked personality of the poet as revealed behind his works. But we are aware that it is a difficult task, as details of Abercrombie's life that throw light on his verse and confirm our conclusions, are not fully available. That is why modern poetry, the poetry of the new trends that came after

¹ *The Idea of Great Poetry*, p. 211.

² *Ibid*, p. 193.

Abercrombie, in particular, is really difficult to understand and appreciate without a clue. Yet it is as valuable to approach the poet's life through his poetry as his poetry through his life, and Abercrombie has himself preferred the first line of approach when revaluing Tennyson.¹ But, of course, there is the risk of some conclusions never tallying with the poet's actual life at all.

It is easy for us to say that Abercrombie must have been necessarily of a religious and metaphysical bent of mind and it is revealed in all the interludes and some early poems. His early life, till an *ad hoc* lectureship was offered to him at Liverpool, seems to be a life of worry. His book "Interludes and Poems", reveals his free vent to metaphysical speculations. His main aim is to interpret human life from a spiritual and religious point of view. Unlike the other Georgians who evince an escapist tendency, he never divorces his poetry from life. He does not live in an Ivory Tower. His is a masculine genius with astounding powers to dive into all systems of metaphysics and give poetic rendering to the most confusing and abstract side of human life. He has what Charles Williams calls a 'Metaphysical sense of life'. Professor Oliver Elton says that Abercrombie draws much inspiration from Kant and Spinoza, whose works made his mind 'hammer', and that he was well acquainted with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and probably Berkeley and the Pre-Socratics.²

It can be seen that Abercrombie was an intelligent student of science. We know that he did not take the degree in Chemistry honours and that he left Owens College, as he realised that science does not contribute much to spiritual emancipation. This attitude is clearly manifest in 'The Fool's Adventure', where the Seeker is warned against his quest of the Self through 'experiment and travel', and told that the proper approach is through 'reigns of mind'. But Abercrombie's scientific training made him capable of high thinking, logical reasoning and clear understanding of the most abstract problems. But even his abstract thinking is not divested of scientific analogies interspersed in his poetry, which clearly leave an indelible impression on

¹ Abercrombie (with others)—Revaluations, p. 60.

² Proceedings of the British Academy, 1939. p. 403.

the readers' minds that Abercrombie must have been conversant with all advanced scientific theories as the heat death, (the atom, relativity, motion, speed) and so on. The following passages must be sufficient to show Abercrombie's fondness for scientific analogies :

(a) "His thoughts burnt like wicked sulphur, and spoilt God's pleasure in the fragrant prayers of saints."¹

(b) "Or scatter a pool of quicksilver and see
How easily the drops are one again ;
But if one drop have rolled among some dirt,
The skin it now hath keeps it out of the rest."²

(c) "What, you're not one
Who thinks the soul a kind of chemistry,
And words, a slag it hides its working in?"³

His plays reveal his democratic sentiment, for all his themes are almost rustic themes. He lets everybody talk and this right of speech allowed in courts has been extended to poetry. The honour of having done so is generally claimed for Synge in Ireland and Masefield in England ; but Abercrombie may also be allowed to share with them the credit of having pushed this new school of poetry—the modern school which believes that everyone has a right to be heard and that every one's point of view is interesting, even if it be a jaundiced one. But the truth is held only when the man is seen as he sees himself, justified in his own eyes. And all the plays of Abercrombie go to illustrate this principle. He depicts the secret parts of human society, its lowest and meanest strata, the slums of humanity, laying bare the tramp, the harlot, the voluptuary, the egoist and so on. His humanism and his indignation against the ills that ought to go are already dealt with in the chapter dealing with "Indignation: An Ode".

Abercrombie's plays are studies of not only rustic life but studies of certain human problems that interest one and all. They also reveal that he is a very great psychologist. He incidentally works up some of the most modern psychological doctrines in some of his plays where he has provided an exciting

¹ Poems, p. 106.

² Ibid, p. 98.

³ Ibid, p. 47.

and exhilarating 'psychological climate'. If we say that Browning appeals to the modern reader more than Tennyson on account of the former's intimate knowledge of psychology, we must also say that Abercrombie, who may be rightly regarded as the modern Browning, should have greater appeal to modern readers on account of his more intimate knowledge of psychology. We easily see how almost all his poems have a psychological setting.

Abercrombie also is a student of the Bible. But he has the anxiety of a fastidious critic for reasonable, logical and convincing interpretation. The themes for many of his poems are based on the Bible. His *Vashti*, *Judith*, *Thomas* are either Biblical or Apocryphal figures; but we cannot fail to notice the new orientation he has given them. According to him, a love of the Bible is the spiritual inspiration of the western civilisation; but his poetry is never divorced from life. His *Vashti* is a champion of women's rights, and not a mere vassal to beauty or man's will; his *Judith* realises the need for 'virginity and perfection'; and his *St. Thomas* is the great apostle who has propounded the modern gospel of life and ecstatic action. These are all strikingly original ideas which only a many-faceted genius of the type of Abercrombie's could give.

We can also trace out occasional glimpses of Abercrombie's feelings of patriotism latent in his poetry. Referring to the noblest of all epitaphs that Symonides has written over the graves of the nameless dead at Thermopylae, who are rather symbols, nay 'apotheoses of an accumulated national sentiment', John Drinkwater points out that even today, Lascelles Abercrombie's lines written for the Roll of Honour of the University of Liverpool—survive even the test of being set in such classic company.¹

"These, who desired to live, went out to death;
Dark underground their golden youth is lying.
We live; and there is brightness in our breath

They could not know—the splendour of their dying."²

Or again we may say that it is Abercrombie's patriotic fervour alone that promoted him to write the other two inscriptions

¹ John Drinkwater—*Patriotism in Literature*, p. 57.

² *Poems*, p. 14.

wherein the poet glorifies 'life that willingly dies'. This is what Drinkwater calls 'public patriotism'. We also find patriotism of place in Abercrombie. He has penned the wonderful lines on Ryton Firs that can stand the test of being set in company with some lines of Scott or of John Drinkwater.

Camillo Pellizzi calls Abercrombie, "A minor Yeats",¹ and his "Ryton Firs" is an example of love of place, with a passion as strong as Hardy's, "so courageous, so unquestioning and so constant as in the great series of Weasex novels, a passion involved always with a spiritual sense that finds its consummation in the supernatural machinery of the *Dynasts*."² Abercrombie laments on the loss of the Ryton Woods in clear notes of patriotic zeal, in terms of utmost simplicity and perfect authority.

Abercrombie has also great love for music. It is manifest in the many metaphors he uses in almost all his poems, from page to page. It is seen explicitly in his "Ode to Sir Walford Davies"³ on the latter's appointment as Master of the King's Music. This love of music can also be found in the words Abercrombie has put into the mouth of Saint Thomas :

"Beautiful is the sound of strings and pipes ;
More beautiful the melody in the mind
Made of the sound ; most beautiful of all
Voices of viols and harps, trumpets and flutes,
Dulcimers, horns, consenting one with another,
And melodies in these voices each on each
Conferring grace, each its own loveliness
Elaborating in concord with the rest,
All to achieve one perfect amplitude
Of manifold music, a single dignity
Of shapely intellectual delight."⁴

Harold Monroe is right when he remarks that Abercrombie 'shows a consciousness of his own defects' through the chara-

¹ 10 Camillo Pellizzi—*English Drama* (Translated by Rowan Williams), p. 193.

² John Drinkwater—*Patriotism in Literature*, p. 139.

³ *Lyrics and Unfinished Poems* (1940), p. 18.

⁴ *The Sale of Saint Thomas* (in *Six Acts*), p. 121.

acters.¹ In "Emblems of Love", when the King Ahasuerus exclaims to his court-poet of his fondness for words :

"Thou hast a night, man, not a week to tell them.
You men of words, dealers in breath, conceit
Too bravely of yourselves ;—O, I know why
You love to make man's life a villainous thing,
And pose his happiness with heavy words." ²

We are at once reminded of Abercrombie's own fondness for words. His fondness for eloquent and rhetorical speeches, is fully revealed in the "intricate, close-packed or overflowing verse of the characters" who are made to utter as many as 250 lines in one single breath. The king and the poet in the Vashti section of "Emblems of Love", the heathen prince in "The New God : A Miracle" and the Ghost of Samuel in "At Endor", all show how Abercrombie expresses his urgent thought in eloquent and rhetorical language. His descriptions of forests, storms, dark nights and sunsets are also examples of his eloquence. Unlike Wordsworth, he finds an objective beauty in Nature and his views are concrete, quiet and homely—at times horrific. The opening lines of his "Witchcraft : New Style", are excellent example for his power of description. And the blank verse which constitutes the greater part of his work, usually respects the movements of common speech.³ Abercrombie writes poetry "not because he must but because he has something to say and has sufficient power to say it in poetry of a considerable rank".⁴ This estimation is partially true. His philosophic message of course, does really absorb a good deal of his interest, but the fine images suggest that he feels also an inner compulsion to give it poetic form. Therefore we are hardly mistaken in attributing autobiographical value to the cry of the blind son in the tragedy called "Blind", on the touch of a girl's hair :

"How I delighted all my feeling
With touch of that strange fineness on my skin !

¹ Harold Monro—Some Contemporary Poets, p. 111.

² Poems, p. 150.

³ R.L. Megroz—Modern English Poetry, p. 152.

⁴ Harold Williams—Modern English Writers, p. 103.

But after, memory of that delight
Wanted to put on words. And I had none
For it to live in, and it ached in me."¹

The charge of Mr. Harold Williams therefore seems to be rather baseless ; for Abercrombie himself expresses in a personal note published in John Gawsworth's book² and in his private letters written to Dr. Percy Withers,³ that his heart's desire is writing poetry.

¹ Poems, p. 49.

² John Gawsworth—*Ten Contemporaries*, p. 19.

³ *English*, Autumn, 1943, p. 174.

Conclusion

Not since from glowing crucibles outpoured
By the Elizabethans has verse attained
Such ardour of molten rhythm; and, true heir
Of their adventuring, you, too, have gained
For poetry rich regions unexplored
Of which man's soul but newly is aware.

—*Wilfrid Gibson*

i. As a Poet

Abercrombie is a difficult poet. His urgent thought is often-times difficult to follow. His subjects are occasionally far-fetched, and deal with metaphysical problems. His style is frequently eloquent. He moves in arid regions of mind. In his own phrase his

“Speculation soareth up,
A bird taking eternity for air.”¹

Further, he carries his philosophical speculation farther than his poetic medium can bear. Lucidity is not his chief virtue. He often combines difficulty of thought with obscurity of expression.

The Georgian poets generally show an interest in ‘metaphysical evil’, and in Abercrombie’s work this interest is carried to an extreme. The work of Rupert Brooke, Drinkwater, W. W. Gibson and Walter de la Mare, at its best is ‘quietly meditative and responsive to the slow-beating rustic heart of England’. Some of them are highly lyrical, some intensely patriotic. Though Abercrombie belongs to the group, except in his interest in rustic characters and his preoccupation with the problem of evil, Abercrombie does not share anything with the rest of them. There is no doubt that he is an ‘original’ poet, both in his choice of themes and in his style.

¹ *Poems*, p. 255.

One is left to wonder if any one else could write such original English as seen in lines like :

“But like a spilth of oil in the stream
Man’s nature the same current flows along
Unmixing in the general kindliness,
Showing like slime against the deep wise water”¹

This is indeed sublime poetry. In language, style, image and thought, Abercrombie is entirely original. Another example of his original English can be had in his description of rain, through the mouth of the Hermit.² He analyses strange themes very enthusiastically. As Herbert Palmer says, “he takes pleasure in out-of-the-way subjects—especially the weird, the mystical, the horrific, the macabre—and sometime suddenly turns an interesting story into a web of philosophical speculation. Witchcraft, the end of the world, a legend concerning St. Thomas, the death visions of a friar, the death of gods, Judith’s murder Holofernes, an assault on the Virgin Mary by a bramble, are among many strage themes which he treats at length and from an individual angle”.³ He is also interested in problems like the origin and nature of Evil, the relation of the Body and the Soul, and Love in many aspects—high and low, imaginative and sensual, true love and false etc. His best poem is *Emblems of Love*; most of his other poems gather round it. How often he turns to the subject of Love and from what new angles he looks at it! For example, in the *Interludes*, *Blind* and *An Escape*, in the *Idyl*, *Ham and Eggs* and in the plays, *The Adder*, *The Staircase*, *The Deserter*, *The End of the World*, *Deborah and Phoenix*, he treats of Love in many ways.

Abercrombie uses much blank verse and has become famous for the valuable experiments he has made in poetry. He has given to dialogue a descriptive or reflective turn as in the *Interludes* or *Emblems of Love*, or a narrative setting as in the *Idyls*. Again metaphor and a recitative quality mark his work throughout. His dramatic monologues show a blend of emotion and metaphysics characteristic of him. We find him making his own experiments in this direction because he has a powerful

¹ Ibid, p. 57.

² Ibid, p. 59.

³ Herbert Palmer—*Post-Victorian Poetry*, p. 296.

dramatic instinct in him, like Browning. He can easily place himself mentally in the situation of any particular character and give out all that that particular character would have felt in that particular situation. This is also like Browning. But like Browning, he does not possess the dramatic genius in him to represent character in action. So he is often eloquent, but his verse is compact, though often rugged and unusual in epithet. He has brought into English poetry a certain hardness and virility. He follows traditional verse forms but not their rhythm and phraseology. He uses daring and sometimes sinister imagery and 'makes variations in melody and musical emphasis'.

H. V. Routh gives a brief but correct estimate of Abercrombie as a poet, thus: "As a poet, however, he betrays a certain kinship with Tennyson and Browning in choice and treatment of theme; and here and there one notices touches of the mysticism congenial to Meredith. Above all, he loved the vividness, splendour, and impetuosity of the 17th century, especially Shakespeare and the metaphysical school, and the eloquence and insight with which the poets dramatised the passions of their age, even 'the grand emotional impulse driving all their existence'. It became the wish of his heart to write poetic drama and monologue worthy of their spirit."¹

If we want to apply Abercrombie's test of great poetry to his own poetry, we find what he calls compendiously "incantation", in his *Emblems of Love*. We find in it the power "to produce in us a sort of enchantment..... a power not merely to charm and delight, but to kindle our minds into unusual vitality, exquisitely aware both of things and of the connexions of things".² Further, this poem, as any great poem does, according to his own definition, "enables a remarkable range, not merely of experiences, but of kinds of experience, to be collected into single finality of harmonious impression."³ Again, the author's own remarks on Faustus and his lyrical ecstasy in a flight of twenty lines of supreme poetry,⁴ are in a

¹ H.V. Routh—English Literature and Ideas in the Twentieth Century p. 83.

² The Idea of Great Poetry, p. 18.

³ Ibid, p. 73.

⁴ Ibid, pp. 60-9.

way applicable to his own lyrical moments, found in the Vastian section of the poem where Abercrombie could sing entrancingly of woman's beauty. These moments, Abercrombie would say "exist for the sake of the poem's final impression; and by existing for that end they are impregnated by something more than their own individual immediate Beauty; they catch a glamour from the final organic beauty of the whole poem."¹ So, whatever Abercrombie's defects as a poet be, judging from this single poem *Emblems of Love* alone, we have to fix him in a prominent place in the march of great poetry. Then, what about Abercrombie's *The Sale of Saint Thomas* (in Six Acts)? Abercrombie says: "It is not the magic of language itself, which accounts for greatness, but that which comes to us through and by means of magical language."² Judged by this standard, Abercrombie's play reveals great poetry; and even if he had not written more but only these two, his place is assured among the great poets.

Abercrombie as a poet used a variety forms, namely, the lyric, the ode, the interlude, the idyl, the short play and the long one. His achievement in these several forms is an interesting study. Whatever the critical reservations in the final account be, he should have his due. It is true, a poetic mind is at work in all his works.

i. *As a writer of lyrics*: Abercrombie is not chiefly lyrical in the strict sense of the word, though he often rises to lyrical ecstasy in his short poems and also his longer narrative and dramatic ones. As a lyric proper is a song, its chief quality is music. A literary lyric appeals to both the mind and ears of the reader, though as a rule it cannot be set to music. In Abercrombie's "Soul and Body," the conversation is exquisitely lyrical. The Body says:

"Thou wilt miss the wonder I have made for thee
Of this dear world with my fashioning senses,
The blue, the fragrance, the singing and the green."³

Here the accent falls regularly so that the metre is regular. And the Soul replies also in regularly accented lines:

¹ Ibid, p. 69.

² Ibid, p. 13.

³ Ibid, p. 3.

“As if fires had made me clean,
 I come out of thy experience,
 Thy blue, thy fragrance, thy singing and thy green,
 Passions of love, and most, that holy fear”¹

These lines are highly lyrical. There is a musical cadence in these lines. The repetition of ‘thy’ in the third line lends emotional fervour to the Soul’s reply, while the dexterous play of vowel sounds, *u*, *a*, *i* and *ee* of the same line and the variation of the vowel sound, *o* in the fourth line, simply make the two lines most musical. Even a lay person who does not know the rudiments of music, pronounces these lines to be most musical, leaving alone their metaphysical import.

Elizabeth’s Song is similarly of great lyrical value. It is subjective in character; it is the artistic experience of a single emotion; it contains verbal melodies that catch our ears and capture our imagination. Even after the song is heard no more, the lines :

“So white, so bright, so fragrantly
 Heart’s delight blossoms in me.”²

and

“In air so bright, with such a flight
 Dances on my wings my heart’s delight.”³

ring in the readers’ minds, revealing Elizabeth’s emotional ecstasy.

The Epilogue—Dedication contains many lines of great lyrical beauty, but the following must suffice :

“For right amidst there was a court,
 Where always musk’d silences
 Listened to water and to trees ;
 And herbage of all fragrant sort,—
 Lavender, lad’s-love, rosemary,
 Basil, tansy, centaury,—
 Was the grass of that orchard, hid
 Love’s amazements all amid”⁴

¹ Ibid, p. 4.

² Ibid, p. 18.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, p. 271.

Open vowels coincide with song notes and many consonants are found to be useful, because they give smoothness or fluidity. For instance, it is to be noticed how, *r*, *m*, *l*, or *n* are used to bring the above effect.

The idea here also captures the reader's imagination and these lines can, as a rule, be set to music. Further, they own something to a diction that has a magical haunting cadence.

The whole idyl, *Mary and the Bramble*, is full of lyrical beauty and is praised by many critics. The following lines are most beautiful in conception and execution :

“Nor that the sun now loved with golden stare
The marvellous behaviour of her hair,
Bending with finer swerve from off her brow
Then water which relents before a prow :
Till in the shining darkness many a gleam
Of secret bronze-red lustres answered him.”¹

There is another passage of haunting beauty. St. Thomas tries to take meaning from the captain's attempt to be more than himself by ‘bringing out the shameless vermin in a gambolling dance’ and taking pleasure in their joy. He takes the clue from the captain and decides to be more than himself and insinuate its meaning into his own affairs—his mission to India. He says to himself :

“More than myself, I must be? More than myself?
Ay, till the Kingdom of heaven is within me,
And the King in his kingdom is one with me!
For by how much I can be more than myself,
By so much am I more myself than ever;
And this can reach perfection.”²

Almost all the passages quoted above the effect of what Abercrombie himself calls, “incantation”, “the power of using words so as to produce in us a sort of enchantment ; a power not merely to charm and delight, but to kindle our minds into unusual vitality, exquisitely aware both of things and of the connections of things.”³

A few poems from the “Lyrics and Unfinished Poems”

¹ Ibid, p. 276.

² The Sale of Saint Thomas (in Six Acts), p. 47.

³ The Idea of Great Poetry, p. 18.

published after Abercrombie's death — ¹ “*The Future*”, “*This World of Terrible Beauty*”, “*I Have No Fear of Death*” and “*My Stick*” deserve special mention because of their high imaginative and appealing quality. They are strictly speaking literary lyrics and meant to be read and appreciated. In the first poem, Abercrombie speaks of God, the Unknown Giant, standing beyond the hill ‘with gyves or garlands in his hands’. But the pity is, none can descry his form or guess his mind. Further, none can know whether we are to be the friends he crowns and loves or chain-gang slaves to suffer lashing in patient droves. But we know this much definitely that

“Gigantic he stands there,
There where we have to go.” ²

Quite in a different mood, Abercrombie must have written “*I have no fear of Death*”. The thought is extremely simple and exquisitely beautiful. The poet has no fear of Death. What he fears is the fact that Death has the power to take from him his children, and his wife.

Finally “*My Stick*” is in a lighter mood, but is not devoid of a philosophical touch. The poet learns a wonderful lesson from his ‘faithful wooden stick’ to stand bold and upright to the end!

Of all these lyrics, we can say that “*All Last Night*”, “*Hope and Despair*”, “*Indignation: an Ode*”, “*R.B.*”, “*White Love*”, “*The Streams Song*” and “*Elizabeth's Song*” are the most beautiful. They possess a haunting loveliness of melody and, here and there, a touch of profound symbolism. The symbolism of “*Hope and Despair*” is especially moving.

(ii) *As a writer of Odes and Interludes*: Abercrombie wrote two odes and five interludes. His “*Ceremonial Ode*” is of the irregular Pindaric type and it has a lofty message to give. It defines the true function of a University. The other ode is on indignation and here also Abercrombie does not follow the fixed and elaborate form of the ancient Greeks. Both his odes resemble the modern English Odes with their irregular metre which changes with the change of his mood.

¹ A Limited edition of 175 copies handset in the Romulus type, published by the Gregynog Press, 1940.

² *Lyrics and Unfinished Poems*, p. 4.

Both are in the form of addresses and this is in keeping with the age-long tradition. Their merits are discussed in their proper places. Both of them display a force of lyric and heroic ecstasy extremely rare in modern poetry.

His interludes are dramatic poems, i.e., poems in dialogue form. They are not meant for the stage. They are poems meant to be read and appreciated. The experiment that Abercrombie made in these interludes is to give them a sort of dialectic or dialogue form, as it is best suited for expressiveness. His themes are highly metaphysical and the dialogue form drives home his philosophical conceptions. His Interludes are strictly speaking metaphysical speculations and the philosophy propounded there is dealt with elsewhere. They may be called "Speculative Dialogues", a name which Abercrombie has given to one of his prose works.

(iii) *As a writer of Idyls*: Abercrombie's "Twelve Idyls", published in 1928, are essentially pieces of poetic research in what may be called 'facts of mind'. They may be characterised in Abercrombie's own words as studies of certain 'unique moments of sense, thought and feeling'.¹ They are also romantic from the point of view of form, setting and atmosphere. But the word 'romantic' lacks fixed or accepted connotation, as different writers mean by it different things. Reviewing Abercrombie's book, "Romanticism",² Mr. John Freeman summarised his argument thus: "the habit of mind which has acquired the name of romanticism is the habit that withdraws from outer things and turns in upon itself—withdrawal from the outer to inner experience".³ If we examine Abercrombie's Idyls, (his spelling is to be noted) we can easily recognise the poet's frequent tendency to withdraw from the outer to inner experience.

Abercrombie chooses his themes from the Bible or from tradition, because they have a special appeal to the popular mind. He even justifies such a choice of old themes in his book, "The Idea of Great Poetry". His idyls are short and they are either

¹ *Revolutions*, p. 72.

² This work was an enlargement of Abercrombie's article "Views and Fairies" published in the *Time Literary Supplement*, 16 August 1917.

³ *Bookman*—Vol. LXXI, No. 426, October 1926.

descriptive or narrative or imaginary pictures. The extraordinary development of imaginative sensibility as seen in his "Mary and the Bramble", the element of an exceptional insight and symbolism as evidenced in his mythological poems like 'The Olympians', 'Zagreus', 'Asmodeus' and the high-flown notions of 'In the Dunes', the horrific in 'Witchcraft : New Style', the exquisitely picturesque description of nature as in 'Ryton Firs' and the undisturbed beauty of 'The Death of a Friar',—all reveal only the romantic aspect of his poetry and not the escapist mentality characteristic of some of the other Georgians.

He takes up for the themes of his Idyls certain psychological moments or situations. Abercrombie has said that the peculiar greatness of Tennyson lay in his presentation of unique moments of sense, thought and feeling, all compounded together.¹ The same may be said of Abercrombie himself, for in his "Twelve Idyls," he exhibits an uncanny knack in presenting such, if not more, intense moments of sense, thought and feeling. But Abercrombie's idyls do not centre round one thing as Tennyson's, though both the poets have similarly caught and developed their themes at various intervals. Tennyson's idyls are descriptive and narrative stories, while Abercrombie's are story-like things, but rather abstract speculations with very little of movement in them. According to W.P. Ker an idyl, is a short poem, giving in a small space what longer poems give in larger ones and anything will therefore do for any idyl.² In fact, an idyll is 'a little picture', and Abercrombie's idyls are all little pictures and they satisfy the popular definition, because each of them represents a scene, a mood, an imagined vision, a romance or incident marked by pathos. But like the idylls of Tennyson or Theocritus, Abercrombie's idyls are not heroic. Like Theocritus, his experiment has been, as he himself admits in his Preface to the Collected Poems (1930), "to give the dialogue a narrative setting." His tendency is what Mr. Herbert Palmer calls "to drop into straightforward dramatic dialogue, marking a considerable severance from the Tennysonian tradition, which demanded that the story must be told con-

¹ Abercrombie, (with others)—*Revaluations*, p. 72.

² W.P. Ker—*London Lectures, Form and Style*, pp. 156-7.

tinuously and with little emphasis on speeches.”¹ It is only here, in some of the idyls, that Abercrombie makes use of rhyme. After a careful study of his idyls, what we particularly preserve in our memory, are the alliterative metre of “Asmodeus”, the slow musical couplets of “the Death of a Friar”, the happily rhymed octo-syllables of “Zagreus” and the relatively simpler but highly lyrical notes of “Ryton Firs”.

(iv) *His Obscurity*: Abercrombie is neglected or *unpopular*, because he is out of tune with his time. He does not give back ‘the image of the time, his form and pressure’. He does not express a modern sensibility or the contemporary feeling of disillusion. Also his idiom is remote when compared with that of T.S. Eliot, or W. H. Auden and others. He is often lyrical and frequently imaginative, but many times tantalisingly obscure.

Now we shall examine Abercrombie’s obscurity. Excepting in his Plays, which are relatively simpler, his urgent thought usually rushes out from his overflowing heart and mind and zigzags in its course. His thought is not a downward current but an up-hill progress darting into the ethereal regions of imagination and speculation. His poetry reveals great industry, and to understand him, the reader should have all the qualifications enumerated by Ruskin for the reading of any author in general. “When you come to a good book you must ask yourself, ‘Am I inclined to work as an Australian miner would? Are my pick-axes and shovels in good order, and am I in good trim myself, my sleeves well up to the elbow, and my breath good, and my temper?’ And keeping the figure a little longer, even at the cost of tiresomeness, for it is a thoroughly useful one, the metal you are in search of being the author’s mind or meaning, his words are the rock which you have to crush and smelt in order to get at it. And your pick-axes are your care, wit and learning; your smelting furnace is your own thoughtful soul.....”²

If that is what a reader should have, it is perhaps a bit too much. It tends to scare away the reader. But the obscurity need not frighten him. As Havelock Ellis observes:

“The impression we receive on first entering any supreme

¹ Herbert Palmer—*Post-Victorian Poetry*, p. 298.

² Ruskin—*Sesame*.

work of art is obscurity. But it is an obscurity like that of a Catalonian Cathedral which slowly grows luminous as we gaze, until the solid structure beneath is revealed. The veil of its depth grows first transparent on the form of art, before our eyes and then the veil of its beauty, and at last there is only its clarity. So it comes before us like the Eastern dancer who slowly unwinds the shimmering veil that floats around her as she dances, and for one flashing supreme moment of the dance bears no veil at all. But without the veil there would be no dance."¹

A student of Abercrombie should therefore have patience and be ready for the discipline necessary to enjoy the supreme flashing moments of the dance without veil. But we cannot deny the right of a great intellectual like Abercrombie to write to his intellectual equals, sometimes at least, in his own style. So one should approach Abercrombie with a definite intellectual background, a thorough grasp of the tradition and a proper understanding of the thought processes of the human mind. It is no exaggeration that if his 'sources' alone are a fit topic for a doctor's cap, as Prof. Elton aptly observes,² how much more difficult should the interpretation of his poems be? For example, "The Sale of Saint Thomas" (in Six Acts) received little notice in the press. It is his biggest single work. "It demands close reading; the style like that of Donne or Browning, is wholly individual; the poetic idiom, so fiery, condensed and rapid has to be learned"³ That is why, probably, it was received with almost complete indifference.⁴ Abercrombie has regarded it as his magnum opus but the world has totally ignored it. In answer to Dr. Withers' letter of commiseration, Abercrombie replied:

'I ought not to repine at not writing poetry: that is foolish egoism and mere velleity. One has to be one thing or another, and I'm a professor: and a damned bad one at that. But there are many worse off than I; and there's always philosophy'.⁵

¹ Havelock Ellis—*Impressions and Comments*.

² *Proceedings of British Academy*, 1939, p. 410.

³ *Ibid*, p. 415.

⁴ *ENGLISH*, Autumn, p. 181.

⁵ *ibid.*

(v) *His Style and Diction*: After a study of his works, we must have formed an impression of his style to distinguish his poetry from that of others. Take any passage from Abercrombie. We cry out: "This must be Abercrombie's". Yes, the style is the index of the poet's personality! We find in it some personal traits, peculiar choice of words, turn of phrases, structure of sentences and rhythm and cadence.

A first reading of Abercrombie's works leaves an impression of what a rugged stylist he is. He tries the limits of one's patience. His mannerisms, his vocabulary, sudden metaphysical speculations, lengthy speeches, colloquial and quaint diction, and every conceivable liberty with language all those are calculated to fill the average reader with despair, if not disgust. They drive even a lover of literature almost frantic. Accustomed as we are to the polish of Tennyson, the emotional fervour of Shelley, the smooth elegance of Goldsmith, the lyric eloquence of Arnold, the balanced structure of Pope, we become painfully aware of the seeming defects of Abercrombie.

But style is not merely external. It is not limited to manner alone. Nor is it confined to the eye and the ear only, the two important sense organs with which we gauge its worth. It is not merely an individual way of expressing ideas, but "style is the man himself". If the mere external manner of Abercrombie's writings is to be judged without the vivid flame-pictures issuing forth, it is a mere rattle of dry bones. The living style of Abercrombie is inconceivable without the flesh, blood and spirit contained in it. Viewed in such a way, Abercrombie's style leaves a lasting impression. The chief charm about his style is the mastery of his medium—a living medium. The throb of its pulse is not felt fully unless Abercrombie is read aloud. It is only when his poetry is heard that its greatness and artistic powers can be appreciated. He is indeed one of those artists who sing 'with their eye on the thing.' His depth is so great that he is a great pioneer in his 'idiosyncratic diction' (as Mr. Wilfrid Gibson would call it) and in the mastery of poetic medium. Again his sweep of ideas is so vast that we can hardly visualise his pictures to the utmost semblance to his ideas. Often his style is turgid and diffuse and hence we have to read his poems a number of times to understand his ideas.

His theories and truths are so novel, so much like discoveries, that they have to be frequently held up and beaten like dough, so that they sink in our minds in the right way and become familiar and capable of recitation. What Prof. Saintsbury said of Carlyle is indeed true of Abercrombie. "His expression, like the matter conveyed in it, may be too strong for the weak, too varied and elusory in its far-ranging purport for the dull, too much penetrated with ethical gravity and clear-eyed recognition of fact for those who like mere prettiness and mere aesthetic make-believe". Abercrombie is thus one of those exceptional literary artists whose style cannot be judged by common standards. His masculine genius is an important factor in a correct estimate of his style. It is not by the tabular method of vocabulary, syntax, figures of speech and paragraphs that Abercrombie's style has to be measured. It is for its capacity for metaphysical speculations, living ideas, and its appeal to the soul, that it is to be evaluated. Abercrombie is a unique stylist, a man of rare intellect, who has made language tell its utmost. Occasionally, we find in him a certain amount of lyrical toughness. Yet there is freshness in phrasing which is his speciality of intellectual masculinity of thought.

His diction and verse-forms are quite suited to his themes. His general theme in the Interludes is that of the progressing soul, and naturally the poet demands from his readers closer attention. "Subtlety with vigour, delicacy with strength, and loftiness with simplicity" are some of the wonderful qualities that are combined in his style to add to the dignity of his verse where sense and sound are united into a harmonious whole. He uses several mono-syllabic native words which no poet has ever used and marks him out for his individual style. His torrential thought is really difficult to follow for an undisciplined mind. His vocabulary is really impassioned and vigorous "assimilating to its grave beauty not only the wealth and dignity of our language but words homely, colloquial, and quaint".¹ No matter though the reader may require a dictionary a number of times for their meanings and be left to serious thinking. It may even sometimes chill his interest in Abercrombie's poetry. But could the reader stand the strain, what a relief afterwards!

¹ Mary C. Sturgeon—*Studies of Contemporary Poets*, p. 20.

His full-mouthed harmonies and colloquial felicities are really enjoyable. Here is an example, taken from "Indignation: An Ode":

"deadly shops
Where the demn'd wisdom of the wheels
Fearfully fascinates men's wit and steals,
With privy, embezzlement that never stops,
The worker's conscience into their spinning roar."¹

Further examples are: 'breathing heaps of formless life'; 'like the pipes and strings of solemn music'; 'that frantic pomp and hurrying forth of life', and 'against the huge bray of the gongs and horns of the Indian priests'. Examples of colloquialisms are many but a few of them will suffice for our purpose: "Can't I away with quiet women", "He is for the fire-works", "Went off in sound respectable diseases both", "homeless doxy", "a simply", etc.

Abercrombie has numerous 'purple passages' and many felicitous single lines. When his imagination is aglow he achieves perfect mastery over his poetic medium. But his besetting sin is diffuseness. He uses more words than necessary and his sentences often run to an identerminable length. Only Milton could manage this with success and even in him it is sometimes irritating. For example, we may quote passages from pages 144-6 and 214-5 of the *Poems*. His diction is compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects. He uses the language of poets and he has many echoes of Milton and Shakespeare. (For example, 'submit' on p. 143, 'scurrile' on p. 315, 'miching weasel' on p. 277, 'multitudinous' on p. 349, etc. suggest Shakespeare, 'stound' on p. 153 is Spenserian. He uses occasionally learned words like 'liquiscent flesh' (p. 314). Often he revives old, archaic words like 'wons' (p. 70), 'sheet' (p. 141), 'throe' (p. 280) and 'garth' (p. 289), which are all Anglo-Saxon. He sometimes uses quite colloquial expressions like 'dapper boy' (p. 189) and 'spunky fellow' (p. 189).

Again Abercrombie is not even afraid of saying ugly things when he thinks they are apt. For example:

¹ *Poems*, p. 13.

"A huzzy flogged to death
For her hard-faced adultery?"¹

This Sherard Vines considers to be bordering on rowdiness,² but Mary C. Sturgeon seems to have anticipated this allegation and answered in a very careful way. For she says in her book that "Mr. Abercrombie has no fear to be colloquial, when that is the proper garment of his thought, the outer symbol of the inner reality. Nor is he the least afraid of fierce and ugly words, when they are apt".³ If, for example, Abercrombie puts such ugly words as the following in the mouth of Rhodope, the slave girl:

"He and his love !
Will I have his old knuckles fumbling me ?
Give him old women ; they'll be glad of him,
But I'll not hold him up, clinging against me
With bushes in his nostrils and his ears." ⁴

It is simply because they are apt. If this passage or the one dealing with the huzzy's flogging, in particular, is taken out of its setting, (a critic like Sherard Vines) may rate Abercrombie to be rash and rowdyish. But Abercrombie's thought commensurate with his style, is difficult to follow as has been pointed out and it requires a number of readings, even when he appears to be simple. In fact as Charles Williams pointed out, he is one of the poets that bear such a repetition, "the first being for story's sake, the second for the single complex poetic effect, the third for details, the fourth for intellectual assertions and the remainder for the mere renewal of delight."⁵ It is clear from this statement of Mr. Williams, how a critic does his poet sheer injustice, if he does not read his works a number of times. Sherard Vines seems to have done Abercrombie this injustice. The aptness and humour underlying this passage ('a huzzy flogged to death' etc.) Vines has taken exception to, and the delight of the author's fine phrases, purple passages and studied similes and intellectual exactitudes that Mr. Wil-

¹ Ibid, p. 422.

² Sherard Vines—*Movements in Modern English Poetry and Prose*, p.19.

³ Mary C. Sturgeon—*Studies of Contemporary poets*, p. 35.

⁴ *Poems*, p. 531.

⁵ Charles Williams—*Poetry At Present*, p. 155.

liams refers to, can only be fully comprehended on the second or the subsequent readings. It is Huff, the wronged Huff, Huff who is robbed of his 'flighty, pretty linnet headed girl' that is putting the so-called ugly question. It is apt only in his mouth, and there is absolutely nothing like bordering on rowdiness on the part of the poet.

Mr. Sherard Vines attributes also harshness and awkwardness to Abercrombie's verse. He is partly right in his charge for in the passage :

"O life I am thinking of, life the wonder,
All blotcht out by a brutal thrust of fire,

Like a midge that a clumsy thumb squashes and smears."¹
The last line is indeed a harsh collocation. Nevertheless, it cannot be said in a more gentle manner and it reminds us only of the harsh music of Browning. Its 'squashes' and 'smears' are ugly and awkward, but the point is, that they all express an ugly act. All the same, Abercrombie's style is at times awkward and grotesque and guilty of what may be called 'stucco-grandeur'. When he speaks of the elder gods, degraded to a place of darkness, he seems to be writing 'nonsense' as Harold Williams puts it boldly. For 'the clumsy words and preposterously awkward phrasing in these lines almost entirely obscure the image present in the poet's mind'.²

"Often their drowned agony shall heave
Large sobs from under, till the shoulder'd pit
Plunges, the blind cumber of the useless mire."³

Referring to the same poem, "The New God: A Miracle", Mr. Frederick Page says: "In this poem, Abercrombie seems to me to be for the most part, writing neither English nor verse."⁴

There are, of course, some striking Passages in this Interlude. But the effect is often spoilt—rather than heightened—by the quite gratuitous use of obsolete words in the belief, very probably, that a poem dealing with antique theme called for an antique setting in words; for example, *breeze* (p.22) for *breeze*

¹ Poems, p. 429.

² Harold Williams—Modern English writers, p. 101.

³ Poems, p. 26.

⁴ Letter from Mr. Frederick Page, London, dated 17 October, 1945.

and *soothe* (adj.) (p.21) for *sooth*; a form not found even in N. E. D. When added to an unusual vocabulary, we have cacophonous lines, the effect is unfortunate. like the lines:

“And the great sides of the world flinch and crack open,
Spilling my glory out of its splitten hidings”.¹

Mr. Harold Williams also correctly points out the poet's ‘grotesque confusion in metaphor’² quoting the following lines”:

“You hear the chime of fawning lipping water
Trodden to chattering falsehood by the keels
Of Kings’ happiness”.³

But he has been described as one “that gave us back the grand Marlovian line reincarnating loves of mythic years”,⁴ exhibiting to us a great freedom in his blank verse which is full of its late Shakespearean ease and Marlovian grace. It is also capable of uttering colloquial things without merely being casual. If we read any of his blank verse poems we find that the blank verse which has been Abercrombie's normal medium has itself helped to make a new freedom for English verse. He makes use of the run-on heroic couplet expressing different movements and emotions. This heroic verse resembles that of Keats, but with absolute freedom of variations. We often notice in his poetry the insertion of a dactyl, anapaest, trochee, or spondee (of course, it depends on sanction). This wide range of Abercrombie's metrical instrument suits his varying moods and ideas. We can aptly quote in this connection Miss Sturgeon's words: “The strong down-beat of the trochee summons the intellect to consider a thought: The dactyl will follow with the quick perception of a simile: The iamb will punctuate rhythm: anacrusis will suggest the half-caught breath of rising emotion, and turbulent feeling will pour through spondee, dactyl, and anapaest”.⁵

The poet's moods of anger and agitation are clearly reflected in his style. In “Indignation: an Ode”, when the

¹ Poems, p. 35.

² Harold Williams—Modern English writers, p. 102.

³ Poems, p. 149.

⁴ London Mercury, December 1938.

⁵ M.C. Sturgeon—Studies of Contemporary Poets, p. 34.

poet is seized by an indignant wrath and worried by the 'built inequities' of the world, his style also expresses the same feelings of anger, agitation, vexation, worry and helpless humanitarianism. For example :

"But how long shall the Spirit see
The Life of Men, wherein with such delight
He walkt his glebe, and in his ways would sing
To do his pleasant gardening,
How long see his own especial ground
Vext in a season of disastrous blight,
Trampled and staled and trodden filthily
By troops of insolence, the beasts of hell?
But the Spirit now is built up narrowly,
And kept within a shameful pound,
Walled in with folly and stupid greed
Lest he should come to plead
Against our ugly wickedness,
Against our wanton dealing of distress,
The forced defilement of humanity,
The foundries and the furnaces
That straddle over the human place."¹

The crudity and harshness in the above passage is indicative of the poet's perturbed feelings of anger, agitation and so on.

If we take for example some lines from the difficult "Hymn to Love", we understand how it is strong both in thought and in music, and how the welding of these elements into a harmony is the poet's triumph. It whispers to us almost with the accents of immortality :

"We are thine, O Love, being in thee, and made of thee,
As thou, Love, were the deep thought
And we the speech of the thought ; yea spoken are we,
Thy fires of thought outspoken :
But burn'd not through us, thy imagining
Like fierce mood in a song caught,
We were as clamour'd words a fool may fling,
Loose words, of meaning broken."²

¹ Poems, p. 12.

² Ibid, p. 129.



We have to note the cunning texture of this stanza which makes concrete the thought's struggle for utterance. We have also to note the variety of the pause intervals. The music begins with fluent vigour and deliberately delays in the second line by two pairs of mono-syllables (spondees). Then it pulses forward reverting to its first tempo like a live thing unleashed; and comes to rest in the final short line. This variety which Abercrombie calls "the modulated repetition of rhythmical pattern",¹ has its wonderful effect on the readers' minds in combining both sense and sound.

As a further illustration of this harmony where poetry is revealed to have been rooted in reality let us take Deborah's fine lines:

And then a hundred beasts of wind leap howling,
And pounce upon the roof with worrying paws,
And roar to feel the walls not shaking down",²

in which, says Martin Ellehauge correctly, "the effect of the roaring wind is reproduced quite successfully". He again points out that the old woman's crude and vulgar words taken from the same play:

"It will be a great wind soon.
Enough drones through the framing of your door
Already, to scrub the chaps upon my skin,"³

serve as an example of a very irregular metre, but admits at the same time that those deviations and variations from the decasyllabic system of blank verse serve 'as a means of fitting mood to idea'.⁴

Let us take one passage from one of his "Four Short Plays", namely, "The Adder", where we have an illustration of the effects of this principle of modulation as indicative of the various emotions in the characters at every interval of thought.

"Our sins are scarlet!
Scarlet!

¹ Abercrombie - *Poetry its Music and Meaning*, p. 21.

² *Poems*, p. 485.

³ *Ibid*, p. 486.

⁴ Martin Ellehauge—*Striking Figures among Modern English Dramatists*, p. 98.

That was a wonderful thing for me to hear!
 And all at once I seemed to be wearing life
 Like a beggarly cheap cloak; and some know how
 To clout their drab stuff with a gaudy patch!
 Scarlet!

Why, scarlet is for fire; and look how mild
 The green and blue and common brown of earth
 Seem when the day ends in a scarlet light!"¹

(vi) *His Similes and Metaphors*: Before concluding the chapter on Abercrombie's style, a few words must be said on his similes and metaphors. Most of his images are all from actual observation and are apt and homely. Only a few can be cited here as examples, and not all. In the passage:

"Now the moles take burrowing jaunts abroad, and ply
 Their shovelling hands in earth
 As nimbly as the strokes
 Of a swimmer in a long dive under water."²

The comparison is to a swimmer and the poet's powers of observation are revealed here. The second example is the image of conquering soldiers:

"how should I not believe a thing
 That calls aloud on my mind and spirit and they
 Answer to it like starving conquering soldiers
 Told to break out and loot?"³

The response of mind and spirit is aptly compared here to the activity of 'starving conquering soldiers told to break out and to loot'. The third simile is the comparison to a winning horse:

"You watch me then
 Looking delighted, like a nobleman
 Who sees his horse winning an easy race."⁴

Here the comparison is very apt and homely. While reading the passage, the reader, no doubt, experiences the delight of the nobleman who sees his horse win an easy race. Equally delightful and homely is the simile of a poor girl.

¹ Poems, p. 375.

² Ibid, pp. 336-7.

³ Ibid, p. 432.

⁴ Ibid.

"For us, with lives so hazardous, to love
Is like a poor girl's game of being a queen."¹

Sometimes Abercrombie's similes are meant for a philosophical meaning. In the passage:

"I see a man's life like a little flame
Clinging to one end of a burning spill;
And the man's in the grasp of a great anger,
Who is for shaking the last glimmer of life
From off him, as you shake the fire off a match
When you would have it done with burning."²

The comparison of man's life to a little flame or the fire of a match is very apt and it shows the poet's intention to philosophise. Another example of this type can be had in the simile of the treading of summer-searching birds:

"The feet of our Spirit have wonderfully trod
The dangers of the rushing fate of life,
As summer-searching birds tread with their wings
Mountainous surges in the air."³

The poet's powers of minute observation are revealed here. Yet another example of Abercrombie's use of simile (apt, happy, eloquent and imaginative) can be had in the passage:

"The spirit in us
Hath, like imagination in a prison,
Kindled itself free of all boundary,
So that it hath no room but its own joy,
Ample as the first, before it fell
Into this burthenous habit of a world."⁴

Another example is the simile of water under the flukes of a harpooned whale:

"Ay, or with that wild, monstrous tail of his
Smash down upon the air, and make it bounce
Like water under the flukes of a harpooned whale
And thrash it to a poisonous fire."⁵

Sometimes, Abercrombie uses long similes. For example,

¹ Ibid, p. 457.

² Ibid, p. 460.

³ Ibid, p. 256.

⁴ Ibid, p. 258.

⁵ Ibid, p. 428.

the simile of two young winds¹ long-tailed as it is, is Miltonic in conception and grand in execution. The conflict between the two desires which constitute man, is beautifully compared to two warring young winds. This is the main point of the analogy. The other details are for ornament's sake. Another passage to illustrate Abercrombie's dexterous use of simile and metaphor can be had from Bacchus in *The Olympians* (p. 352). The following is another simile from the pen of Abercrombie, which illustrates not only his grand style but also his love of detail:

"I have great need of it: like a jail'd man
Am I, who having piteously craved
The strange use of light, is all the more thereby
Discomforted, to see how narrow his den—
The wall surprised leering at him, and glistening
Dank and unwholesome, sick with a waterish brash
That dribbles down and clots the drooping beards
Of long white cellar-growth, hopeless of sun;
Qualm'd with loathing, to stare on his puddled bed,
The unclean floor, and know how he mates on it."²

The main point here is that the speaker, Idwal, a poet compares himself to a jailed man. And the rest is a vivid description of the jailed man with pitiful craving for the use of light, with increased discomfiture at the narrowness of his den, the wall sick with a waterish brash that dribbles down and clots the drooping beards of long white cellar-growth etc. are details that add to the grandeur of the simile.

Some times Abercrombie's mind works with lightning-like rapidity and one simile swiftly follows upon the heels of another as in the following passage:

"Listen! Your lives are propt like a rotten house.
Your souls, that should have noble lodging here,
Have crept like peasants into huts that have
No force within their walls, but must be shored
With borrowed firmness. Yea, man's stubborn lust
To feed his heart upon your beauty, is all
The strength your lives have, all that holdeth you
Safe in the world,—propt like a rotten house."³

¹ Ibid, p. 81.

² Ibid, p. 75.

³ Ibid, p. 158.

Occasionally, Abercrombie mixes a single plain simile in an eloquent speech. Judith's address,¹ (with Marlowian grandeur), holding up the head of Holofernes, illustrates the point.

Abercrombie's use of metaphor is also unique. Some of his lines show us a characteristically quick telescoping of metaphors. For example :

"She is God's bribery to man
That he the world endure,
His wage for carrying the weight of being.
Nay, she is rather the eternal lure
Out of form and things that end,
Out of all the starry snares,
Out of the trap of years,
Into measureless desire ;"²

Speaking of Meredith, Priestley says: "But as it is, his imagination pours out images while his thought presses forward, and we see him leaping from metaphor to metaphor like a man jumping from log to log across a river. And it is essential that the reader should jump with him, or should merely catch the flash of an image and then pass forward to the next."³ These words are indeed applicable to Abercrombie and the passage cited illustrates the same point. Sometimes his metaphors reveal his vigorous intellect and wonderful imagination, as revealed in the following lines :

"Life, the mother who lets her children play
So seriously busy, trade and craft—
Life with her skill of a million years' perfection
To make her heart's delighted glorying
Of sunlight, and of clouds about the moon,
Spring lighting her daffodils, and corn
Ripening gold to ruddy, and giant seas,
And mountains sitting in their purple clothes—
O life I am thinking of."⁴

We notice here how Abercrombie's thought kindles a train of beautiful images. Some other times he uses simple and plain metaphors as seen in :

¹ Ibid, p. 241.

² Ibid, p. 154.

³ J. B. Priestley—George Meredith, p. 107.

⁴ Poems, p. 429.

“Why, I am
The earth,—here in my being is the earth
Longing for motherhood as she ever does”¹

or

“Words : they are messengers from out God’s heart”²

or

“What, you’re not one
Who thinks the soul a kind of chemistry,
And words a slag it hides its working in”³

Occasionally again, Abercrombie gives fully-mouthed harmonies with brilliant metaphors. The following passage illustrates the point :

“and as he near’d the bliss
The man lay in, the paradise of hues
That Mary loved him with, the sheltering blues
Mingled with sweet surprise of green, began
To glare a burning amber, and there ran
Through the translucency of azure shade
Reddening curls of lustre, and a blade
Of whitening vehemence”⁴

He is very good at crystallisation, especially when ecstasy takes hold of him. Many passages from “Emblems of Love” and the opening lines of “Witchcraft: New Style” exemplify the above point. But Abercrombie is at once a thinker and a philosopher. So he does not dally longer with his images.

ii. As a Playwright

Abercrombie is a realist as a playwright. He has dealt with the rustic world, and has thus shown his democratic sentiment in poetry. The modern age is characterised by love of realism and of the social problems of the day. Writers like Shaw, Galsworthy and Barrie wrote problem-plays, i.e., treating of all kinds of social problems—marriage pointing out the place of woman, law and justice, strife between capital and labour, class-prejudice, crime and punishment, and so on. The modern

¹ Ibid, p. 88.

² Ibid, p. 48.

³ Ibid, p. 47.

⁴ Ibid, p. 286.

drama has thus become far more intellectual than it ever was before and gives plenty of food for thought. It seems that Shaw has once said that he wanted "a pit of philosophers". The modern drama has thus become a compelling factor in bringing the enlightened audience to the theatre. Abercrombie too wrote intellectual drama, not very successful on the stage. "They are lacking in action, and the heady texture of his poetry asked too much of audiences that had forgotten how to listen to poetry at all, but the fault would have been cured by the experience of regular work in a theatre."¹ His dramatic theory seems to hang on to the old interludes, in treatment and in metre, 'a simple, forthright avowal frankly symbolic and lyrical in nature, perfectly capable of dispensing with *action*, and yet remaining dramatic'. Critics may think that his dramatic efforts are rather suitable for the library than the stage, but Abercrombie himself has offered an explanation of this in the preface to his "Collected Poems", thus:

"The distinction between poems and plays may perhaps seem somewhat notional, when the poems are in dramatic form and the plays are in blank verse. For me, however, the distinction is valid enough, though the nomenclature is a little confused; for, of course, to print a play in verse is to submit it to be read and judged like any other composition in verse. Nevertheless, dramatic poem and poetic drama proceeded from wholly different motives. The plays were written to be performed; they were written in verse because that is the medium proper to the kind of drama they attempt; they were written in blank verse because nothing else can combine so effectively the flexibility of speech-rhythm with the formality of metrical pattern. Against the opinion, which I believe exists, that to write a play in verse is thereby to render it unstageworthy, I would maintain that, equally on the stage as in print, the chief function of the dialogue is to be not imitative, but expressive; and language finds its most expressive use in poetry, for which the natural rhythm is metrical. That, at any rate, was the motive from which these plays proceeded; it is not to the point that their success on the stage has, in fact, been of a very modest order."

¹ John Drinkwater—*Discovery*, p. 217.

Abercrombie deals with certain problems in his plays but he is never didactic like Shaw, nor does he use the play for propaganda purposes. The problems he raises, or simply states, are only incidental and intellectual. They may be described as studies of certain aspects of human life and nothing more.

The views of George Bernard Shaw regarding the utilitarian or the didactic aspects of art do not agree with Abercrombie's theories of aesthetics. According to Shaw, 'art for art's sake' is a simple shibboleth and he believes in the didactic art to reform the existing ills in society. Abercrombie would have certainly laughed at Shaw had he heard him say: "For art's sake alone I would not face the toil of writing a single sentence"; for, Abercrombie was the great exponent of an aesthetic theory of art.

Abercrombie's power of characterisation is great. Modern drama is unheroic in the sense that it has not created characters like a Lear, Othello, Hamlet, Cleopatra or Desdemona. Even if there are any heroes or heroines worth the names, they are all common little men and women, not great and awe-inspiring personages. But Abercrombie is slightly different from the other contemporary writers in this respect; for he has given us many memorable characters. They are all women, ranging from a queen to a fisherwoman, (Vashti, the woman in the 'Staircase', Katrina and Judith and (Deborah)—what a galaxy of wonderful memorable feminine characters!

But Abercrombie's forte as a playwright lies chiefly in providing what may be called a sort of psychological climate for his plays. His "Adder" and "Deborah" are clear illustrations of certain psychological principles. In "The Adder" he illustrates the principle of association and that of natural development of instincts like curiosity and pugnacity shaping their way into self-assertion. Seth's daughter, who has been brought up in utter seclusion segregated from the *scarlet* side of life, begins to feel an inexplicable throbbing in her heart, for power, for pride and for freedom. She accidentally sees an old tramping beggar-woman, with a patch of scarlet on the back of her poor cloak, which colour makes a special appeal to the girl's emotions. She thinks that the beggar-woman must have some pride in wearing it. She associates this scarlet colour

with her blood and regrets the uselessness of her blood so shining scarlet, 'if life takes nothing from it'. Thus suppression has provoked curiosity in her, which has finally led to self-assertion, for she asks her father in the end with all the vehemence she commands :

"What right have you
To chest me of a knowledge all folks have?"¹

His "Deborah" is indeed a bravura-piece, daring in its attempt to shape life, though it results in failure. In this three-act play the author chooses a fisherwoman for his excellent illustration of the principle of sublimation (a principle of socialisation, a method in which instincts, desires and tendencies are directed into channels approved by self as well as society). In sublimation, there is a refinement of the crude instincts, a rising to higher personal and social levels. Sublimation is therefore a really healthy form of diverting the psychic energy of the instincts and complexes into useful and noble channels. A childless woman may find satisfaction for the maternal instinct in caring for orphans. A person disappointed in love, may seek satisfaction in religion or in social service. Or a person of thwarted desires and hopes may take to literature or poetry. This modern principle of sublimation has essentially interested Abercrombie who worked it out in his "Deborah". This attitude may be described as the dauntless defensive measure of Deborah against the hard buffets of Fate. If we analyse the process of her sublimation, we find three stages. When she loses her lover David, she employs all her mental energy in bringing up the orphan boy, Barnaby, and finds pleasure in taking care of him. Again when Barnaby comes of age, she takes delight in the union of Barnaby and Mariam, the sister of her lost lover. But when Barnaby deserts Mariam and disappoints Deborah, the latter again bravely faces it and sublimates her disappointed desires in the service of the deserted girl.

Abercrombie also illustrates the principle of suggestion, another psychological concept. It can easily be traced out in the raving of Mariam for Gabriel Hounds, after she gives birth to a still-born child. The same principle is also at work in

¹ *Poems*, p. 381.

“The end of the World” in rousing up a sudden sensation and in the consequent re-estimation of values among the village folk. In “Phoenix”, again, the Queen has successfully adopted this principle of suggestion in exciting the sex-instinct in the prince for the object of his father’s love. As another example, we can take *Witchcraft: New Style* which was published for the first time in “*Georgian Poetry*” (1918-19) and was later included in *Twelve Idyls* (1929). “Outwardly it seems to be a somewhat uncanny, but thoroughly vital tale of a common woman’s dominance over her husband, through a shrewd magic of her mind. Inwardly and really it is a psychological study of a very modern kind, a clear, clean-cut analysis of the power of suggestion”.¹

iii. As a Philosopher

Prof. V. de S. Pinto tells me that he knew Abercrombie quite well and he certainly worked out no consistent system of philosophy as it is not the business of a poet.² His poems abound in metaphysical speculations and some times, they are based on the Bible. But, Abercrombie is not an orthodox Christian either, or not ecclesiastically. The question scarcely arises in the case of a man who gives his mind free play. He salutes deep thought wherever he finds it—in the Bible—in the legend—in the Bhagavadgita. It is difficult, to know how deep or wide is Abercrombie’s knowledge of the Bhagavadgita. A poet makes much of a few hints.

The question whether Abercrombie has a philosophy at all may now be taken up. Theodore Maynard, an American critic, considers him as “an egoistic sceptic” with “a philosophy that is negative”, standing apart from Coleridge and his German metaphysics, Shelley and his atheism, Swinburne and his paganism and even Davidson and his materialism.³ He says that all of them were positive though vague, but he calls Abercrombie the subtle sceptic who ‘finds the notion of final, immutable absolute truth incredible’. He explains how he calls him an ‘egoistic sceptic’, not abusively, but only by way of

¹ Marguerite Wilkinson – *New Voices*, p. 416.

² Letter from V. de S. Pinto, dated 12th March 1958.

³ Theodore Maynard—*Our Best Poets*, p. 116.

definition, 'egoistic' probably meaning 'pertaining to the Self, and not selfish, and 'sceptic' meaning 'a negative philosopher'. Maynard quotes an illustration the last 25 lines of "The Fool's Adventure", where the Fool finally finds the monger of Good and Bad within one's own Self.

However, Maynard himself gladly acknowledges that his criticism is incorrect 'if applied to any one of two or three particular instances' and that "that large admission falls with special force to that very remarkable play, 'The Sale of Saint Thomas'". 'The New God' proclaims unequivocally that Abercrombie is a positive philosopher of the orthodox type that propounds the love of God as the surest and the only means of salvation. Saint Thomas preaches in unmistakable terms the doctrine of monism—unity of souls—which leads to ecstatic action in the construction of the 'Palace of Souls'. Maynard passes by these examples and concentrates on the Seekers, namely, Idwal, Peregrinus and chiefly the 'Fool', and describes Abercrombie as an 'egoistic sceptic'. Referring to "The Sale of Saint Thomas" Maynard says:

"Truth is not even relative, Mr. Abercrombie says in effect, because a relative implies an absolute truth. But what may be accepted as truth is anything that delights the spirit's intellectual lust. This is the idea of the whole of 'The Sale of Saint Thomas'. He is condemned by his Lord for 'refusing faith in the unknown powers within man's nature'; but he is not condemned because he refuses faith in the whole point of his apostolate—that known power outside man's nature. He is told—not to carry the gospel to India—but explore his 'knowledgeable desire'." ¹

But this criticism was based only upon the first act of the play published in 1911. In the fuller version of the play (1931), we see how the doubting Thomas not only explores his knowledgeable desire but also preaches the Lord's gospel of the union of souls. Mr. Maynard, therefore, stands alone in his provocative criticism of Abercrombie's metaphysical poems. Dr. Una Ellis Fermor, for instance, estimates Abercrombie as 'one of the finest metaphysical and religious poets of the

¹ Theodore Maynard—*Our Best Poets*, p. 125.

country and this century, enjoying a high esteem for his work in France also'¹ Wilfrid Gibson writes in his preface to "Lyrics and Unfinished Poems of Abercrombie" (1940) thus:

"No poet, assuredly, has ever had a more vivid sense of the reality and vitality of beauty or has celebrated the glories of the universe with a more rapturous ecstasy; his was a realism which accepted life in all its manifestations as one and indivisible; and he was ever seeking to reveal the spiritual reality which underlies superficial appearances, and disclose the essential integrity of the visible and invisible universe."²

Even granting Maynard's criticism for a moment, Abercrombie's so called scepticism never leads to unhealthy pessimism. He is definitely hopeful of man's inner powers and the ultimate realisation of his destiny. His readers do not at all feel any feelings of depression or hopelessness. They are, on the other hand, infused with feelings of ecstasy, hope and optimism. Abercrombie believes in the ultimate truth—the union of souls—and it does not warrant cessation or negation of all activities. He recommends ecstatic action, and the final truth is certainly an ideal to be striven after. It is therefore better to regard Abercrombie as one who belongs to 'the type of wise that soar but never roam'. Prof. Oliver Elton says: "He read much philosophy, not for the sake of any formal system, but as a poet reads it, for whatever might fire his imagination or point to some satisfying creed. He is for ever circling round the ancient problems: the nature of beauty, the place of love in life and in the universal order, the possible union of the individual self with the One, and the attendant mastery of evil"³. He is not 'metaphysical' in the sense in which we apply the term to Donne and other poets. They are preoccupied with scholastic philosophy of the Middle Ages and strange conceits. Abercrombie is 'metaphysical', because he tries to probe the mysteries of Evil and of the Self. Such philosophical poetry can succeed only when, as in the metaphysical poets, it is limited to deep emotion and feeling. 'Religious' poetry succeeds when it is inspired by an intense experience imagina-

¹ Letter from Dr. Una Ellis-Fermor, dated 12th October, 1944.

² Preface to *Lyrics and Unfinished Poems*.

³ *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1939, p. 399.

tively presented as in Thompson's *The Hound of Heaven* or in Hopkin's *The Wreck of the Deutschland*. Abercrombie's poetry is not religious in this sense, nor is his philosophical speculation rendered in terms of feeling. Though he is often lyrical and imaginative, he is many times obscure and diffuse.

H.V. Routh says: "Had he fully succeeded in fusing the old and the new, Abercrombie would have achieved more than any poet of his age. But he was too completely dominated by the passionate urgency of his seventeenth century models, and tried to create conflicts as deep as theirs. He searched far and wide for subjects which might give his imagination scope, and found what he wanted sometimes in medieval lore, sometimes in the lonely lives and self-communings of his fellow-craftsmen, and yet again sometimes among the obscure tragedies and comedies of the underworld. In every situation, we are invited to sympathise with the cravings of the infinite soul imprisoned and individualised among the instincts of each healthy human body—art (he would say) thrives on the undecided tension between the physical and metaphysical—and only death can resolve the tangle."¹

While concluding, it must be admitted that Abercrombie has some defects. They are 'laborious minuteness', want of a sense of humour, highly serious and soaring intellect, suppleness of style characteristic of crude resonance and finally what Herbert Palmer calls, a sort of 'diffuseness'.² "He is, though a very sensitive and imaginative poet, an extremely hard-headed one, and much of his tough, tangled verse is too cerebral to permit of quick reading".³ But, he has his own virtues. They are his integrity of thought, his mastery of poetic medium and his lofty and soaring imagination. When all is said, we cannot resist the conclusion that there is something Titanic in him which defies criticism and he certainly lives as one the greatest poets of the century. Of all his works, *Emblems of Love* and *The Sale of Saint Thomas* and the two plays *The Adder* and *Deborah* and the Ode on Indignation are of high

¹ H.V. Routh—*English Literature and Ideas in the Twentieth Century*, p. 83.

² Herbert Palmer—*Post Victorian Poetry*, p. 295.

³ *Ibid*, p. 296.

architectonic value, and they are sure specimens of pure and permanent art. His poetry is great for his metaphysical speculations, for his lofty sentiments, for his mastery of medium, for his soaring intellect and for his integrity of thought. Without doubt, then, he has a unique place among moderns and he richly deserves the esteem given him by his friends in the Special Number of ENGLISH issued in his memory.¹

Mr. Wilfrid Gibson referring to Abercrombie's 'many-faceted genius' and bemoaning the loss of his friend, says: "The interruption of the war when he was in the full exercise of his mature powers and the exigencies of implacable circumstances, prevented him from realising many dreams; and, in going through the scattered papers he has left behind him, it is sad to note how many promising conceptions suffered an untimely frustration. Yet, withal, what a noble legacy has it been his to add to the incomparable riches of the English inheritance."² When Dr. Elton says, "Few English poets of mark have set forth their critical creed so fully and methodically", the reviewer in the *Oxford Magazine* says, "It is this dual aspect of Abercrombie's work which is likely to fix his place in the march of English literature."³ It is quite an unprofitable speculation what Abercrombie could have further done, had he been spared to us for a few years more. But, his contribution to literature is evident, as seen in all preceding pages and it is certainly great. Though some think his poetry is going out of date, the writer of this book, believes that all this rich legacy will sparkle:

"In the light of lights

Man's little works strewn on the sands of time, sparkle

Like cut jewels in the beatitude of God's countenance."⁴

¹ English, Vol. IV, No. 24, Autumn, 1943.

² Preface to "Lyrics and Unfinished Poems", p. xi.

³ The Oxford Magazine, Nov. 16, 1939.

⁴ Robert Bridges — Testament of Beauty.

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38. *English, Autumn 1943.*
39. *London Mercury, Christmas 1938.*
40. *Oxford Magazine (10 Nov. 1938).*

APPENDIX

(The chronological list that follows is the list of Abercrombie's works and is taken from the proceedings of the British Academy, Volume XXV.)

LIST OF WORKS

1908 "Interludes and Poems" (John Lane). Dedication: 'To Catherine'. "Blind" was reprinted from "The Independent Review", 1907 (later "The Albany Review"); "The Trance" "Hope," and "Despair", from "The Nation."

The volume was reprinted in 1928 (Lane) with some slight revision of "Ceremonial Ode" and of "Fear."

1910 "Mary and the Bramble." 'Published by the author, Much Marcle, Herefordshire', and there re-issued in the same year. Dedication: 'To my mother'.

1911 "The Sale of St. Thomas" (i.e., Act. I only). 'Published by the author, Ryton, Dymock, Gloucestershire.' Included in "Georgian Poetry," 1911-1912 (1912). See. too "Poems," 1930; and for the whole six Acts, 1931. Dedication: 'To Arthur Ransome, my Friend.'

1912 "Emblems of Love, Designed in Several Discourses" (Lane). Dedication: 'To my Wife'. "Hymn to love" is reprinted from "The Vineyard."

"Thomas Hardy, a Critical study" (Martin Secker). New Edition, reset, 1919, 1924; fifth printing, 1935.

"The Function of Poetry in the drama". In "The Poetry Review, March". Reprinted in "English Critical Essays, Twentieth Century" (1933, O. U. P., 'World's Classics', No. 405), pp. 252-72.

"Deborah" (Lane). Dedication: 'To Patrick Abercrombie.' Reprinted 1923. Never acted. Probably finished end of 1919 or early in 1910.

1913 "Speculative Dialogues" (Secker). Prose. Never reprinted.

1914 "Poetry and Contemporary Speech." Pamphlet No. 27 (Feb.) of the English Association.

"New Numbers," Vol. i. 'Published at Ryton, Dymock, Gloucestershire', in four numbers; no more were issued. The writers were Rupert Brooke, John Drinkwater, and Wilfrid Wilson Gibson; besides L. A. who contributed:

Feb. "The Olympians," see 1928 - April. "The End of the World." Reissued 1915 in "Georgian Poetry." Produced by Miss Muriel Platt at Bristol in 1914; by John Drinkwater at Birmingham Repertory Theatre in 1915; and by Jackson Wilcox at the Playhouse, Liverpool, in 1920 with "The Staircase."

August "The Innocents," see 1928.

December "The Staircase." Produced, see April above.

1914. "The Epic" (Secker), not dated. Reissued, reset, in 1922.

1914-15. "War and the Drama." In "The Bristol Playgoer, 14 December 1914, pp. 5-8, and January 1915, pp. 11-14.

1922. "An Essay Towards a Theory of Art" (Secker).

"Four Short Plays" (Secker). Dedication: 'To Edward Marsh.' Includes:

"The Adder." Produced in 1913 by Basil Dean at the Liverpool Repertory Theatre, and by John Drinkwater at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. Reprinted from "Poetry and Drama."

"The Staircase." See 1914 (and also for production).

"The Deserter." Produced at the Leeds Arts Theatre (192-?).

"The End of the World." See 1914 (and also for production.)

1923. "Communication versus Expression in Art. In "British Journal of Psychology" (general section), vol. xiv, part i (July), pp. 68-77. Read to Aesthetics section of "British Psychological Society," 29 January 1923.

"Principles of English Prosody; part i: the Elements" (Secker). No more parts appeared, but a sequel was projected (see above, p. 18).

"Phoenix: Tragicomedy in three Acts" (Secker). Dedication: 'To John Drinkwater.' Produced at St. Martin's Theatre (1923?)

"Stratford-on-Avon: Report on Future Development." By Patrick and Lascelles Abercrombie (Liverpool, U. P., Hodder & Stoughton).

1924. "The Theory of Poetry" (Secker).

"The Year's Work in English Studies for 1923" (O. U. P., for the English Association), vol. iv, pp. 1-19 (i.e. the section on 'Literary History and General Works').

"The Idea of Great Poetry" (Secker). The Clark Lectures, given at Cambridge, 1923, reduced and revised; also given (recast) as the Ballard Matthews Lectures, 1924, at the University College of North Wales, Bangor.

1926. "Romanticism" (Secker). Revised and expanded from three lectures given during 1926 at the Birkbeck College, University of London. The first—bodies the substance of an article on 'Views and Fairies' published in "The Times Literary Supplement," 17 August, 1917. In the second occur passages of blank verse translated from the.....of Empedocles, interspersed with others by L.A. himself: 186 lines in all, none of which are reprinted either in the "Twelve Idyls" of 1928 or in the collected "Poems" of 1930.

1927, "The Year's Work".....for "1925-6" (1927), (as above), vol. v, pp. 1-25.

1928. "Twelve Idyls and other Poems" (Secker). Dedication: 'To Elizabeth and Robert Trevelyan.' For "The Innocents" and "The Olympians" (both now largely rewritten) see 1914. "Witchcraft—New Style," had appeared in "Georgian Poetry," 1919; "Ryton Firs" in the same, 1922 (lyrics are now added; inscribed 'To David, Michael, Ralph'); "In the Dunes," in "Georgian Poetry," 1922, and in "A Miscellany of Poetry," ed. W. Kean Seymour, 1922; Ham and Eggs, in "The Chapbook," 1923.

"Drowsie Frighted Steeds" (Leeds: Chorley & Pickersgill). "Proceedings" of Leeds Philosophical Society, vol. ii

part i, pp. 1-5, Argues that the above, and not 'drowsie-flight-ed', is the true reading in "Comus", line 553.

"Preface", pp. v-viii, to "The Iliad of Homer" ('the first twelve staves') translated by Maurice Hewlett.

1929. Introduction, pp. vii-xiv, to "Poems by Nicholas Nekrassov," translated by Juliet M. Soskice (O. U. P., 'World's Classics', no. 340).

"Progress in Literature" (C.U.P.), The Leslie Stephen Lecture, delivered at Cambridge, 10 May, 1929.

1930. "T. E. Brown." In "xix th Century and After," May; vol. cvii, pp. 716-28.

"The Poems of Lascelles Abercrombie" (O.U.P., in "The Oxford Poets"). Contains the poems and dramas previously published, except the verses in "Romanticism," 1926, p.v.

"A Plea for the Liberty of Interpreting" (Milford, for the British Academy). Shakespeare Lecture, read to the Academy 7 May, 1930. Printed also in its "Proceedings" for 1930; and in "Aspects of Shakespeare" (O.U.P., 1933), lectures to the Academy by various hands.

1931. "The Sale of St. Thomas" (Secker); i.e., the six acts completed. See 1911, 1912, 1930. Dedication as before.

"Colloquian Language in Literature" (Clarendon Press). In tract no. xxxvi of Society for Pure English (series vii, pp. 517-23.)

"Principles of Literary Criticism." In "An Outline of Modern Knowledge" (Gollancz), pp. 859-907. 1932, reissued separately (Gollancz.)

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